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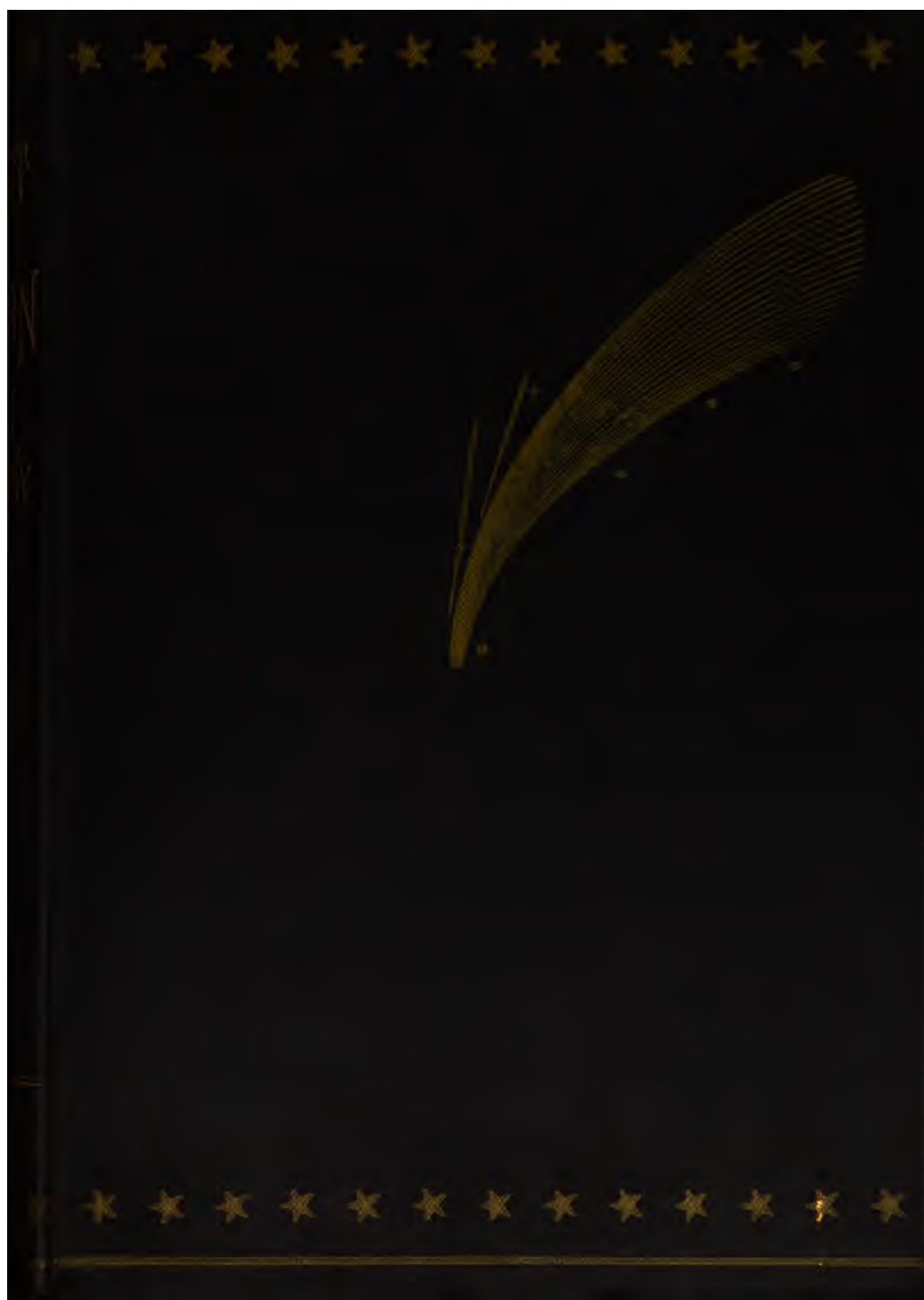
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THE
COMET OF A SEASON

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'MISS MISANTHROPE' 'DEAR LADY DISDAIN' 'DONNA QUIXOTE' ETC.

'One who blazed
The comet of a season'
Byron



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THE COMET OF A SEASON.

CHAPTER XIII.

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES.

THERE was silence between the two girls for a moment or two after Melissa had made her revelation. The dusk of evening was gathering; the air was soft; Geraldine's windows were open; the footfall of passengers echoed along the street; and the sound of the barrel-organ, which had touched Melissa's sensibility not long before, was still heard in the room, 'faint from farther distance borne.' Geraldine could hear distinctly the beating of Melissa's heart, as she sat close to the troubled girl.

She could also hear the faint ticking of the pretty little clock that stood on the chimney-piece; and an odd whimsical fancy came into her head that the little pit-pat of the pendulum ought to represent the beating of the absent lover's heart, keeping time and tune to the throbs of Melissa's enamoured bosom. Geraldine assumed that it was an ordinary love affair, but that perhaps the youth required some little direct encouragement from the maiden. She was conscious even then, and she remembered it well afterwards, of a certain sense of relief in the knowledge that it was not Clement Hope on whom Melissa's uncontrollable affections were fixed. 'She would never do for him,' Geraldine thought; 'she hasn't soul enough; she's too petulant; she couldn't make him happy.'

Geraldine was sorry for Melissa and angry with her too. But she was not at first much alarmed by Melissa's disclosure. It did not

occur to her to think who the person could be to whom Melissa had made her confession of love, and she was more inclined to be amused than shocked.

‘Is this anyone,’ she asked, ‘whom your father would like?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Melissa coldly. ‘I have not consulted my father.’

‘But won’t your father expect to be consulted?’

‘I don’t think my father would care to be consulted about his daughter making a fool of herself and writing a silly letter to a man.’

‘But the man will answer the letter, won’t he? He must speak to your father or to you.’

‘He won’t answer my letter,’ Melissa composedly answered, ‘because he doesn’t know my name.’

‘Oh—then you didn’t sign it? You didn’t write in your own name!’

‘No,’ Melissa answered in a dismal tone, ‘I did not get so far as that—but I dare say I shall some day.’

‘Well, you are a very dreadful little girl, Melissa, and that is the truth of it. I hope you won’t get so far as you say. I hope you will be content with your anonymous outpouring of homage. But I should like to know who the man is, if I might—if you don’t mind telling me; and I think, as you have trusted me so far, you might trust me a little farther perhaps.’

‘What good will it do you to know?’

‘Well—only this, that I think I could better judge whether this humour is likely to last with you or not, and whether *he* is likely to find out his mysterious admirer, and whether it would matter if he did. Is he a very young man?’

‘No.’

‘He is not a very old man, I suppose?’

‘No; he is not old, and he is not young, and he might be any age. I wish I had never seen him. No, I don’t—I’d rather not have lived than not see him.’

Geraldine really began to think from the girl’s manner that things were looking serious. ‘Have I ever seen him?’ she asked.

‘You go on,’ said Melissa, ‘as if this was a game of Twenty Questions; and it isn’t. Yes—you have seen him; and he has seen you; and I wish he had not.’

‘Why do you wish that?’ asked Geraldine, astonished.

“‘Demetrius loves your fair,’” said Melissa, “‘oh happy fair!’” With all her ignorance and her indifference to reading, Melissa, as we have already seen, had a little knack of picking up a Shakespearian quotation and employing it prettily enough.

‘This is mysterious,’ Geraldine said. ‘Well, if I had any influence over him, I am sure I

would make him over to you with all my heart. But I cannot imagine who he is; we know so very few men—I mean, you and I know so very few together. I know it isn't Mr. Hope, and I know it isn't Mr. Fanshawe.'

'Stuff!' said Melissa contemptuously. 'Think of Mr. Fanshawe!'

'Well, I do think of Mr. Fanshawe; I think very kindly of him, but I know it is not he—I suppose it isn't Captain Marion?'

'Not likely!' said Melissa.

'Then, I give him up,' said Geraldine, 'and there's an end of it; for I have gone through all our list of acquaintances.'

Melissa's face bore such an expression of surprise, and something like contempt, that a light seemed to come from her into Geraldine's mind.

'Melissa,' she said, 'you don't mean Mr. Montana?'

'Don't I, though?' Melissa replied. 'But

I just do. I am in love with him; madly in love with him, if you like—there! I have told you all. Laugh at me if you please, or scold me, or pity me; it is true all the same; I am glad I have told you; I must have told somebody, or I should have screamed it out in the night. I have written him love letters—grovelled before him. Oh! what will he think of me if ever he finds out?’

‘But he must never find it out,’ said Geraldine. She had turned pale; the thing was serious.

‘Oh, he will find it out,’ said Melissa. ‘Some day I shall betray myself; I cannot help it. I wish I had been a better girl. I wish I had learnt to think more of what people say—and all that! I wish I had cared for saying prayers—and—and that sort of thing.’

Poor Melissa did not mean to speak irreverently; but her turn of expression was touching in the very simplicity of its irrever-

ence. She could think of no other words at the time.

‘Prayers and that sort of thing!’ said Geraldine, horror-stricken.

‘Yes, anything you like. I suppose you can pray? My mother does not care about prayers, and that sort of thing. She never did. My father is too busy—I suppose men don’t pray. Anyhow, I wish I were like another girl. Oh, how I wish I were like you, for one reason above all others.’

‘I don’t know any reason,’ said Geraldine. ‘I haven’t a father, and I haven’t a home.’

‘No,’ said Melissa, standing up and clenching her little hands; ‘you have not. But Mr. Montana cares about you a hundred thousand times more than he ever did or will care about me—that I know.’

Geraldine was really pained by these wild words. She was deeply sorry for Melissa; but now there began to mingle with her

concern for Melissa a certain vague undefinable sense of alarm about herself. Mr. Montana's manner had from the first been unwelcome to her; and if others saw it as well as she, if others had the same impression forced upon them, if a girl like Melissa could see it, how distressing it must be to be brought continually into a sort of companionship with Montana? Always there had seemed something ominous to Geraldine in her relationship with him. She was not afraid of him as others were, or impressed by him and his strange manners and his singular beauty. But there was something uncanny in the way in which his shadow seemed always to be thrown across her path. Her first thought on hearing Melissa's words was a longing to go away somewhere, anywhere, out of Montana's range; and then came back to her the more reasonable thought that she had much better stay where she was and try to help Melissa out of her difficulty,

and if possible help her to cure herself of her foolish passion. She went to work resolutely to reason with the girl, but did not seem to make much impression.

‘Let me alone,’ said Melissa at last ; ‘advising is never any good with me, nor arguing, nor scolding. It was always my way, the more I was pressed not to do a thing, the more I wanted to do it. You can’t keep me back, Geraldine, from doing anything that comes into my mind. I could not keep myself back. I will try to keep out of this scrape as long as I can, but some day I shall tell him all this one way or another. I shall either write it or I shall speak it. I shall not be able to keep it in ; and I suppose he will rebuke me and preach me a sermon and tell my father all about it, and Captain Marion will shake his head over me and think what a bad girl I am, and what good girls his daughters are—although I don’t know that, either ; I fancy

one of them, at all events, is nearly as far gone as I am myself. But anyhow you will all be ashamed of me, and I shall be ashamed of myself. But I am in love with him all the same, and he must come to know it, and that's all about it.'

There was not much use in saying more on the matter just then. Melissa's words about Montana, and her hints about some one else as well as herself, made Geraldine unwilling to mention his name again.

'Now I hope I have shocked you enough for once,' Melissa said coldly, 'and I'll go. I had better get the redness out of my eyes, hadn't I, before dinner? You can tell on me, Geraldine, if you like; you can tell my father, or Captain Marion, or Sydney, or anybody. I should fancy it would be the duty of a good girl to tell such a thing to a wicked girl's parents, but I am not a great authority on the subject. Do as you like; I don't much care.'

‘You dreadful little thing! you know I’ll not betray you,’ Geraldine answered. ‘I don’t know that I am not doing wrong; I don’t know that I ought not to tell your father; but I won’t. You trusted me, and I’ll keep to my trust. But oh, my poor child, how I wish you would speak to your father. Oh, when I had a father——’

‘Yes,’ Melissa said, ‘I dare say!’ She was going away scornfully; but something in Geraldine’s expression seemed to strike her. She turned back and took Geraldine’s hand gently, and asked in a low tone, ‘Will you kiss me, Geraldine?’

Geraldine took the little palpitating girl in her arms and kissed her.

Montana was a constant visitor at Captain Marion’s house. He never missed a day. He came and went when he pleased. Sometimes, but not often, he dined and met people there; his habit, however, was to come in early in the

day and before any ordinary visitor was likely to arrive. He was a good deal with Captain Marion, who still remained under the impression that he was getting to know all about Montana's schemes. He hardly ever failed to look into the drawing-room and see some of the young ladies.

With all Captain Marion's admiration and reverence for his friend and possible leader, he could not help feeling that Montana's visits had strangely changed the atmosphere of the house. He was always glad to see Montana; and the singular fascination with which Montana had impressed him from the first in no wise diminished, but rather increased, from the frequency of their intercourse. But Captain Marion could have wished sometimes that the women were out of the way. Montana's coming and going acted strangely upon all of them, Katherine admired him in the most open way, flattered him, hung upon his utterances—followed him

about, one might say, almost like some faithful animal clinging to his master's heels. Captain Marion did not like this. It puzzled him; it sometimes irritated him. His soft, affectionate, unsuspicious ways did not allow him to think that Katherine was trying to get up a flirtation with the prophet and leader, and indeed Montana's position of prophet and leader made it easy for women to offer any adulation to him without suggestion of levity. Yet Marion did not like to see his daughter thus openly devoted to Montana. He thought there was something at least unladylike, not to say unwomanly, about it. He wondered Trescoe did not notice it; was sometimes glad he did not notice it, and sometimes thought it rather weak and silly that Trescoe did not see it and talk to her seriously and put a stop to it. On the other hand, the coming of Montana either sent Miss Rowan out of the room or condemned her to absolute silence. She clearly disliked and distrusted

Montana as much as Captain Marion's younger daughter believed in him and adored him. This, too, made Captain Marion uncomfortable. He was very much attached to Miss Rowan. He was always happy to have her near him. He would have wished her to like everything he liked, to love all that he loved, to have the same tastes, inclinations, and tendencies as he had. It distressed him to find that she shrank from Montana so openly, and to all appearance disliked him so much. He wondered that Montana was not repelled by it. He was afraid sometimes that Miss Rowan's manners might lead Montana to come less often.

Again and again Marion was on the point of remonstrating with both young women—with Geraldine for her repelling manner to Montana, and with Mrs. Trescoe for her too open admiration. Then, he could not but observe with pain the strange ways of Melissa Aquitaine, about whom he felt an almost greater sense of

responsibility than if she had actually been his daughter. Her whole nature seemed changed since Montana came above the horizon of their little world. She crept into corners when he was there, and scarcely spoke, but started or grew pale, or looked angry or alarmed according as others spoke and he spoke to them. She who had been such an audacious, outspoken, pert little chatterbox was sometimes changed into a melancholy, bitter, broken-down creature. How Montana failed to notice that something was amiss with the little girl whenever he came into the room Captain Marion failed to understand. Marion himself was anything but an observant man. His sympathies and not his observation guided him in this instance. When he cared about anybody, man or woman, he was sure to observe that person's movements closely and kindly, and thus it was that he came to notice the strange ways of his old friend's only daughter. But Montana, who had keen

observation when he chose, had no such sympathies to guide him, and he hardly ever noticed the little girl whose odd ways disturbed Captain Marion. To make matters worse, Katherine was always saying spiteful little things to her father about Melissa, and suggesting that Melissa was madly in love with Montana and was making an exhibition of herself.

One day Marion lost patience a little.

‘I tell you what, Katherine,’ he said, ‘I don’t think little Melissa is the only woman in this house who sometimes makes an exhibition of herself. I think if I were you I wouldn’t show such awful admiration for Montana.’

Katherine got red and looked angry, but concealed her anger.

‘Why, papa,’ she said, ‘you are awfully fond of him—you adore him. I like to do whatever you do.’

Marion smiled in spite of himself at the absurdity of the answer.

‘That’s all very well, Katherine,’ he said, ‘for me ; but for a young woman to go on showing such admiration is quite another thing. I wonder how Trescoe likes it.’

‘But Frank doesn’t care a bit,’ said Katherine. ‘He knows it’s all right.’

‘Yes, yes, of course, we all know it’s all right,’ said Marion ; ‘but, my dear, don’t you think it would be better to be a little more reserved ? I don’t wonder at your admiring Montana. He is a man that everyone must admire—at least, almost everyone,’ he hastily added, for he remembered how Miss Rowan did not seem quite to admire him. ‘But then, you know, I think it would be more ladylike to be a little more reserved. After all, Montana is not an old man. He is still what would be called young, and he looks younger than he really is, and he is very handsome.’

‘But then, you know, papa,’ said Katherine, ‘one does not think of him as one does of other

men; nobody thinks of flirting with him. I am sure I don't; I am sure I should not have the courage. One might as soon think of flirting with John of Leyden or with some saint.'

Marion said no more, but he observed that the adulation went on as much as ever, and that it did not seem to be just the sort of adulation which a woman offers to a John of Leyden or to a saint. However, he was sure there was nothing amiss with Katherine, he said to himself, and Montana was the safest of men. Montana never for a moment put on the manner of one who flirts with women, or is conscious that they are trying to flirt with him. His manner was just the same to men and women whom he liked. Evidently, Marion thought, he did not like Miss Rowan. He seldom spoke to her, although Marion noticed that he often fixed his eyes on her.

Another little trouble to sweet-tempered

Captain Marion was the growing melancholy of his daughter Sydney. Young Fanshawe came very often, and was intensely devoted to Miss Rowan. He was very friendly with Sydney, as he was with Melissa, but he showed an undisguised devotion to Geraldine. She talked to him and went about with him as freely almost as if he had been her brother. It sometimes happened that poor Sydney was thrown a little into the shade—was left, as it were, in a corner by herself. Once or twice, when Clement Hope called after their walk to the Tower, she caught herself wishing that he would come very often, and thinking what a very handsome young man he was, and how like a picture, and how sweet and tender his ways were, and how very delicious it would be if he were only to be a little friendly and companionlike with her, and talk with her in a recess of the room as somebody was always talking with Geraldine. But then, again,

would come the reflection into Sydney's mind that most assuredly if Clement came often he would devote himself either to Melissa or to Geraldine, and that she would be left out in the cold just the same as before. Captain Marion could not help seeing that Sydney was depressed and dull sometimes, and that something was wrong with her. He often thought he noticed, with peculiar pain, that there was a certain coldness in her manner towards himself, and that her affection was much less demonstrative than it had ever been, although at no time had she the demonstrative ways of Katherine.

This puzzled as well as pained him. None of the talk had reached his ears which had sometimes come to those of his daughter. He did not remember that he was still a clever, handsome, attractive man, little past the prime of life as yet, with plenty of money, and that in his house, apparently on the most familiar and

affectionate terms with him, and more so with him than with any other of his family, was a young, bright, and handsome girl who was believed to be poor, and who had all the world before her to make a way of living for herself. It never occurred to Captain Marion that a good many people were likely enough to assume, as Mrs. Aquitaine had long since assumed, that Sydney Marion would soon have a young stepmother.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CRISIS.

THE wrecks come to the shore. The shore is not expected to go out and meet the wrecks. Sometimes, badly off as the wrecks already are, it might be better for them if they did not come to the shore. The shore only batters them a little more than the sea had done. We do not know whether Montana could be fairly likened to a shore in the good sense or the bad, but certainly a good many wrecks came to him during his London visit. Wrecks of projects, wrecks of ideas, of hopes, of philanthropic schemes, of conspiracies—wrecks of men and of women constantly drifted to him. There

was hardly a broken-down inventor, projector, or dreamer in London who did not seek him out and endeavour to get a new charter of hope from his helping hand. Men who believed in nothing sought him out in order that they might be confirmed in their unbelief. The visionaries who had plans for bringing all the world to instant peace, the men who had discovered the means whereby war might be brought to an end through the virtue of some invention so destructive that whole armies and fleets disappeared at a touch, the men who had a scheme for the foundation of one universal religion and brotherhood of nations—all these came to him.

Montana employed several secretaries, and they were kept busy all day long in opening and answering his letters. He made it a point of principle or of honour to answer every letter if he could. Not a few of his correspondents were evidently writers whom the world called

mad men or mad women, but still, when a letter was not anonymous, he endeavoured to give it some sort of reply. Happily for him, a considerable percentage of his writers were anonymous, and so much time at least was saved to him and to his staff. He continued to receive pretty regularly the effusions in the handwriting which had sent a cold shiver through the veins of Clement Hope. He hardly read them. He glanced at them just closely enough to see that they were of the same kind, breathing the same hysterical passion of girlish adoration and love. They had absolutely no effect upon Montana. The invitations to assist a new discoverer of perpetual motion had quite as much interest for him.

Not all those who sought Montana were wrecks. Stately galleons floating safely to port, tall ammirals proud in their strength, gilded galleys with silken sails—these sought him out

too. It became a matter of competition amongst the aristocratic to secure him for a dinner; and even to get his presence for a few minutes at an evening party was an object to be intrigued for long in advance. He only went amongst those who had shown some interest in his particular movement. No persuasion, no entreaty, could induce him to accept what may be called a general or miscellaneous invitation. He never consented to dine out or go out anywhere for the mere sake of meeting fashionable people and distinguished strangers.

Now, we have already mentioned the invitation pressed upon him by the Duke of Magdiel in the name of the Duchess, which Montana had coldly and almost contemptuously declined. The refusal naturally only made the Duchess still more eager to have him at her house, or even to meet him at some other house. It was impossible for her ever to

unbend so far as to make the attempt again in her own name, even if there had been the least chance of success. She was therefore beginning quietly to give up the idea, and resigning herself to the conviction that, after all, these Americans have no manners. But her daughter, Lady Vanessa Barnes, was not to be so easily disconcerted. She had married a man whom her mother did not like, and who was not of aristocratic rank, but who made up for his defects by having an immense amount of money, and by looking up to his young wife as the head of his house and the star of his existence.

Lady Vanessa Barnes held herself to be in a sort of rivalry to the Duchess as regarded social distinction, and had never quite forgiven her mother the coldness which the Duchess at one time showed to her future son-in-law. Lady Vanessa Barnes hardly ever made any movement in social life without having in the

recesses of her mind some thought of the opportunity it gave her of showing how great a man her husband was, and how she could bring all the world to his feet as well as to her own. The moment she heard of the rebuff given to the Duchess by Montana, she determined that Montana must appear in her drawing-room, and be seen by the Duchess there. She was very clever, very beautiful, very ignorant, full of audacity and self-complacency, and with about as much reverence in her nature as a schoolboy has. She had heard a great deal about Montana, but to her he was for a long time only a funny sort of man who had odd notions, and about whom people used to tire her with their ravings. But he became a very important personage indeed when there was a chance of bringing him to her drawing-room and showing him off in triumph to her mother the Duchess.

Lady Vanessa quickly went to work. She

besought all her male friends who knew anything of Montana to try to get him to dine at her house, or even to come to one of her parties. All her plans proved failures. 'I will have him, all the same,' she said to herself; and the more the difficulties seemed to grow, the greater grew her determination to overcome them.

She had not many accomplishments, but she was a remarkably good amateur actress. She had so much courage that she could always make the fullest use of any gift she possessed, and she had the audacious purity of a savage girl. She once played the part of a saucy page at some private theatricals in her own house, and when the play was over she mingled with the company for the rest of the evening in her page's dress, making fearless and full display of her beautiful legs. Lady Vanessa went to hear Montana speak, and formed her opinion of him in a moment.

‘The man has no more head than a pin,’ said the audacious lady. ‘I don’t see anything in him. He is very handsome, but I don’t care for beauty-men. I think I can manage *him*.’

It was not difficult for anyone interested in Montana’s movements to find out where he passed his days and his evenings, with whom he had luncheon, and with whom he dined. He was dining one day with Captain Marion and his household, and the ladies had left the room and the men were alone, when a servant brought a message that a person, who would give no name, wished particularly to speak a few words with Mr. Montana.

Montana never refused to obey a summons of this kind. It suited his purpose to show that he was ready to receive an appeal from anyone, however unknown, and that he placed himself and his services at the disposal of all humanity. He did not ask who the

person was, or even whether it was a man or a woman. He instantly rose, as a soldier rises at the word of command, and left the dining-room.

‘Montana hardly ever gets a moment to himself,’ said Captain Marion, with a certain air of vexation, for one of his guests had just succeeded in drawing the leader and prophet into a conversation, animated on Montana’s part to an unusual extent.

‘Can’t think how he manages to see so many people, and to do so much,’ one of the guests remarked. ‘Does he see everyone that asks for him? They say he does.’

‘I really think he does,’ said Marion. ‘I never heard of his refusing to see anybody. If the crossing-sweeper from over the way wanted to have a discourse on the immortality of the soul with him, Montana would leave his dearest friend and go and talk with the new inquirer.’

THE COMET OF A SEASON.

Meanwhile Montana was shown into the little library, and there he found a tall young woman, veiled, according to the immemorial custom of mysterious heroines.

‘You don’t know me, Mr. Montana,’ the lady began, without giving him time for thought; ‘but I know you; everyone knows you. I have come to-night to claim a service at your hands. I ask you to believe that it is one which will do you no discredit, and which, I think, you ought not to refuse. Will you trust yourself with me, and go to a place not ten minutes’ drive from here?’

Montana was a little puzzled. He began to doubt whether he had not to do with some crazy religious enthusiast.

‘I think,’ he said coldly, ‘I should like to know what sort of service I can render you, or what object I could serve.’

‘You have no right to ask any questions,’ was the quick answer. ‘I claim your service.’

I must have your presence and your assistance. More depends upon it than you can think of now.'

'But am I the only one who could be of use?'

'You are the only one,' she replied. 'Do you think I would have sought you out in this audacious way if any but you could render the help which a human soul now demands?'

'Are you sincere?'

'Look in my face, and say if I appear like one who would waste your time to no purpose.' She threw up her veil, and showed Montana certainly a very handsome face, with bold dark eyes that looked into his own without a gleam of admiration or homage or coquetry, but only earnest resolve.

Montana became a little interested.

'It is not far, you say?'

'Ten minutes' drive,' said she. 'My carriage will take you there. I am a lady,

although what I am doing now might not lead you to think so ; and I know you don't care for ladies. You would grant my request much more readily, I dare say, if I were a poor milliner's girl. No matter ; I cannot help myself. I must be what I was born. And now let us waste no more time. Come with me.'

Montana took his hat, and went with her. They got into a carriage, and drove in silence through some streets and squares. She never spoke a word, neither did he. It did not escape his observation, as she moved once or twice in the carriage, that under her veil and cloak she was in evening dress.

They came to a stately house. Montana got out and handed her from the carriage.

'Come with me,' she said.

They passed up a flight of stairs, amongst many servants and some bustle. Montana was more and more puzzled. She drew him into a small side room, threw off her veil and cloak,

and showed her tall and very handsome figure in evening dress. Then, with a laugh, she said :

‘Mr. Montana, you don’t know me. I am Lady Vanessa Barnes, and my mother is the Duchess of Magdiel. I tried to get hold of you in a fair and open way. I sent you invitations again and again, and you would not come. So I determined to carry you off; and I have carried you off, and played this ridiculous game; and you will only look foolish if you don’t fall into the thing now, and let people think you came here of your own free will. Otherwise it will be all over the town to-morrow that the great Mr. Montana was made the victim of a practical joke by Lady Vanessa Barnes. You can’t help yourself; so come, forgive me, there’s a dear man, and let us go into my drawing-room, and I’ll present you to my mother.’

Montana had at least one great quality of leadership. The more sudden a difficulty, the

more quickly he saw how to deal with it. When driven into a dangerous corner, all his hesitancy and viewy vagueness left him, and he could survey the whole situation and make up his mind what to do in an instant. He saw at once that, trivial and ridiculous as his present embarrassment might appear, it was really serious for him. It would never do if it were to get known through London that the great mysterious leader of men had been made the victim of a saucy young woman's practical joke, and turned into the laughing-stock of a fashionable drawing-room. Anything must be done to avoid that. He at once accepted Lady Vanessa's invitation, and took her apologies with a gracious gravity which almost impressed her. He met her guests, was the lion of the evening, was inexpressibly polite to the Duchess of Magdiel, condescending to the Duke. He managed somehow to give the Duke and Duchess, and many other people, to

understand that he had come there solely to oblige Lady Vanessa. He spoke of Lady Vanessa with an almost paternal tenderness. Everyone assumed that she was among his most devoted followers and closest friends.

Lady Vanessa herself was positively bewildered.

‘Call me good at acting!’ she said to herself. ‘I can’t compare with him. I’m not in it at all. One would think the man had dandled me in his arms in my innocent infancy!’

She had gained her point, however, and felt grateful to him, and was determined never to let anyone know what she had done. She began to feel interested in him, and to have a sort of admiration for him. His coolness, and what she would irreverently have called his ‘cheek,’ overpowered her.

Montana was determined, for his part, to exhibit Lady Vanessa everywhere in the

character of his close friend and pupil. In no other way, he thought, could he escape the risk of being one day or other made ridiculous by the true story getting out. He would exhibit her in the East End as well as in the West. The congregation of the Church of Free Souls must see the beautiful and high-born Lady Vanessa accompany him thither one Sunday. That would make all safe. Even if the story got about then, it would not be believed. Montana felt a good deal interested, too, in the sprightly audacity of the young woman. The very manner in which she had made light of him gave her a curious interest in his eyes. He was weary of the adoration and adulation of women. He positively admired this woman who had laughed at him, and was ready, if opportunity should arise, to laugh at him again. He had been drawn to Geraldine Rowan from the first by her evident dislike of him, and the resolute manner in which she repelled him.

He was growing into a profound, and for him an almost impassioned, admiration of the girl who had thus treated him. He was beginning to believe that Geraldine was the indispensable companion of his life and sharer in his plans. He told himself that she was predestined for him, and he predestined to conquer her, to make her love him, to make her become his wife. He had set his heart upon this ; and in what he set his heart upon, Montana always saw the finger of Providence. It was not so much that he loved Geraldine, but that he would not do without her ; she must marry him.

In a very much modified and milder way he felt a desire now for the friendship of Lady Vanessa Barnes. The lady, for her part, liked his company well enough. It amused her to go about with him here and there ; to drive him in her pony-carriage ; to exhibit him in the Park ; to parade him at Mr. Barnes's dinner-

parties. He was still as much as ever the lion of the season, and it was something for her to be always able to command his presence. She had tried to penetrate into the story of his early life, and the one only return she had for her curiosity was an impression which somehow seemed to be conveyed to her that he was a man of high birth, who had deliberately made up his mind at an early age to sever himself from the society to which he naturally belonged. He did not say this to her, but she came to think it; perhaps had fancied it all for herself. Still, when she did jump to the conclusion, she let Montana know quickly enough that such was her conviction, and Montana did not contradict her or set her right. He only smiled a sweet vague smile, and said nothing. He was about this time beginning himself to think that there must be some truth in this theory of his lofty ancestry and stately youth.

It was easily arranged, then, that Lady

Vanessa and her husband should go with Montana one Sunday to the Church of Free Souls. On the day appointed for the expedition Montana was himself to deliver an exhortation to the Free Souls who lived on the smoke-wreaths of doctrine that went up from the altars of that temple. Montana came to the church with Lady Vanessa and her husband in their carriage; he handed Lady Vanessa out in the full sight of an awe-stricken crowd. Even the most uncompromising democratic spirits of the place were pleased, at first, to see their prophet in aristocratic company.

The Church of Free Souls was very crowded on this particular day. To get to see Montana, even for a moment, was the ambition of a great many. To be able to hear him speak was a thing to struggle and crush and wrangle for. To hear him speak from what in an ordinary temple would have been called a pulpit was to confer on oneself a sort of distinction for the

remainder of the season. Then, the peculiarity of the place in which the discourse was to be held, and its odd out-of-the-way situation, lent a new and weird charm to the attraction of the day. Therefore the Church of Free Souls had had a specially strange and motley congregation. Carriages thronged the narrow ways that led to it. Unwonted silks and satins rustled through its dingy passages and up its decaying stairs. Huge servants in plush, with powdered heads, lounged about its rickety doors, and looked mildly contemptuous at the slums and the people around. Artisans, with close-cut hair and keen dark eyes, hustled their way impatiently through this fashionable throng of fine ladies and finer footmen. Professional-looking young men, with rounded bulging foreheads and spectacles and long colourless hair, were pushing eagerly in. Young women in water-proofs, and with uncared-for locks and fringes, represented clearly the speculative part of

the fair sex—the ladies who have ‘views’ as to woman’s rights on this side of the grave, and are aggressively sceptical as to anybody’s rights, wrongs, or existence on the other.

Just as Montana was handing Lady Vanessa out of her carriage, another carriage brought up Captain Marion, Geraldine, Sydney Marion, and Melissa. Melissa grew red and her eyes shot angry fire as she saw the leader’s attention to the great lady of whose friendship for Montana she had already heard. For the first time in her life Melissa began to form political opinions, and they tended very decidedly in the direction of Radicalism. It flashed through her mind at that moment that the only thing which could make the world sufferable to rational and high-spirited persons would be the instant abolition of the order of aristocracy, and it is not certain that there was not at the same time in her breast a special yearning for very severe

measures to be taken against the feminine members of that order.

Montana only saw Lady Vanessa as far as the inner door of the temple. He then withdrew to enter the building by a side door, intending to remain in seclusion until the moment should arrive for him to come out upon the platform and begin his discourse. Montana made it a rule never to exhibit himself to a congregation of any kind before he had to speak, or after he had finished speaking. He kept out of sight, in mystic seclusion, until just the moment came for him to begin his address. Then he presented himself to his admirers, and the moment he had done speaking he bowed and withdrew. Even if he had to be one of many speakers at a public meeting, he always took care never to arrive at the place, or at least never to appear on the platform, until it was his turn to go on. He had an impression that for an audience to have a man long under their

eyes diminishes their interest in him. They grow familiar ; they are critical ; they begin, perhaps, to study minute points of appearance, of dress or deportment. The glory of a leader's presence might thus have its lustre worn away. Montana always took care that, as far as might be, his dress should be faultless. He wore it of the latest fashion of whatever civilised country he happened to be travelling in. To him there always seemed a dash of the vulgar about the ambition of some persons to look like foreigners, even like picturesque foreigners, in any country. Montana's principle was to dress up to the newest fashion of the people surrounding him ; and to let his personal appearance impress by its own merits, without aid from oddness or foreign ways.

The audience was settling down. An observer of any keenness could not have failed to notice its curious and motley composition. The mingling of rich and poor is of course a

condition of all congregations ; but congregations do not usually exhibit many different types of class-character, if such a word may be used, and of intellectual and moral individualism. Almost every man and woman here appeared to represent a separate mental order. So, at least, it seemed to Geraldine, as she looked round the nearest benches. Katherine sat by her, flushed and eager and nervous ; Melissa pale, with downcast eyes, as if she hardly ventured to look up. Mr. Trescoe was supposed to be somewhere about the building, but he had got lost, and nobody took any trouble to find him. Clement Hope came in, and on his arm as he went up the hall leant his stately father. Many eyes turned towards the tall handsome young man, and the still taller old man with the fine head of grey hair and the broad shoulders, and the dignified half-soldierly bearing. He seemed to lean on Clement's arm more out of affection than because of any need

of a staff or prop to sustain his steps. The congregation inclosed many remarkable faces and many remarkable pairs, but no pair more remarkable than Mr. Varlowe and Clement.

There was a long service before the orator of the day appeared. The spiritual guide who usually conducted the ministrations of the church began by reading various portions from the theologies of all countries, the object of this exposition being to show that, whatever men might have said, or thought they said, or wanted to say, at all times and in all ages, on the question of the soul and the future life, they all believed exactly the same thing, and that the more strongly they contradicted their neighbours the more irresistibly did they prove that they and their neighbours were in complete accordance. Confucius and Pascal, Mahomet and Cardinal Newman, Torquemada and the prophet Ali, George Fox and Dryden's Shaftesbury, were satisfactorily made out to

have been in the most full and exquisite harmony in regard to their religious beliefs. The only objection, indeed, which the preacher seemed capable of suggesting with regard to the theological views of men in all ages and in all countries, was that a certain monotony pervaded them, and that it would have been rather better if they could now and then have managed to get up a slight difference of opinion, if only for the sake of adding interest to their speculations. The preacher then delivered a short discourse of his own, in which he explained that the great orator, teacher, soldier, and preacher from the New World, the man who himself proposed to found another and a newer world, had consented to offer a few suggestions to that congregation to-day. He gave a brief outline of Montana's career, glowing into a kind of eloquence as he went on, and described Montana as one who had been warrior, explorer, pioneer, political

leader, and spiritual guide, and who now, he said, had been able to lay the hand that had wielded the sabre and the pickaxe in the soft clasp of London fashion, and had bidden the West End to throb with a new and noble pulsation. He drew some such picture of Montana in the fashionable circles of London as Horace Walpole in two or three lines has done of Burke amongst the nobility and the wits of Paris, where the charm and earnestness of Burke for a while, we are told, made Christianity fashionable. He alluded also to Montana as a man who originally came from the Old World, and, he vaguely hinted, from some great old family. The impression left upon the minds of the congregation was that Montana's birth and parentage were of a lustre fully in keeping with that of his personal career. If he condescended to clasp hands with the working men as they were, it was not because he might not have lived, if he

chose, all his life in the drawing-rooms of duchesses and the ante-rooms of palaces. The speaker so fully believed all he said, and was evidently so thoroughly impressed by Montana, that his discourse fell with strong effect on the expectant congregation. Those who had seen Montana and those who had not seen him were alike eager for the moment when the hero of the hour should make his appearance.

At the right time, and from a side door to which people's eyes would not naturally have turned, Montana suddenly came out and stood in an instant full in face of the congregation, on the platform from which the former speaker had just been addressing them. A pale ray of sun found its way through the blurred panes of one window, and fell slanting on Montana's head and face. He looked handsome, impressive, and almost unreal as he stood for a moment in perfect silence, and with his eyes looking directly at the congregation,

and seeming to search into the thoughts of every man and woman who gazed at him.

There was a moment's pause, and then Montana had just begun with the words 'My brothers and my sisters,' when a cry from the midst of the hall turned every eye and every thought away from him. The cry came from the lips of the tall white-haired old man whom people had noticed not long before as he entered the church. Rising to his feet and clutching the rail of the seat before him, Mr. Varlowe fixed his gaze on Montana, and called aloud, 'Oh, Absalom, my son! my son!'

CHAPTER XV.

‘DOTH NOT A MEETING LIKE THIS MAKE
AMENDS ?’

PERHAPS, if Montana had not had time to resist the first impulse of his mind, he might have given in to what certain writers call ‘the voice of nature.’ Perhaps he might have welcomed with outward satisfaction at least his father’s recognition, and owned himself the long-lost son. But unluckily for him, he had time to reflect. He could not stop in the middle of his discourse. He had to go on, and while going on he was well able to detach his thoughts from his subject and think over the course that

was best for him to take. His eloquence did not cost him much trouble. The words came easily; the thoughts were vague or very slender. A thread of idea was able to water a whole field of phrase. He was free to let his eloquence stream away as it would while he tried to review his position and decide as to his course. He was not long undecided. Before he had got through half a dozen flowing sentences of monotonous eloquence and vague grandeur, he had made up his mind.

Perhaps even then, if Lady Vanessa Barnes had not been with him, if she had not been brought into the place by him, if he had not exhibited her as a sort of stately captive in front of the whole congregation, he might have taken the part for a moment of a sincere and honest man, and gained by it in the end. But he could not resolve to step down from his pinnacle of greatness in her presence. Just now he had the superiority, but in a moment the tables would

be turned. He dreaded her free and thoughtless laughter, her ridicule and her contempt. He knew what sort of story she would make for her friends of the ridiculous scene she had witnessed in the East End church when the great leader and prophet, whose descent was veiled in mystery almost as sublime as that of one of the sons of the Greek gods, was claimed in the church by a retired livery-stable keeper, and had to confess himself the son of such a father. Rather than suffer that, Montana thought, he would do anything. He kept telling himself all the time that it was not for any idle pride of his own, but for the sake of the cause. What would become of the cause he was to lead, the people whose chief and prophet he was to be, if he were thus made a theme for aristocratic ridicule and popular laughter? Then, after all, perhaps the old man was mistaken. There was still hope. It might turn out that the man was not Mr. Varlowe and his father, but somebody

else ; and in any case, is everything true that one fancies has happened in his childhood and his youth ? Perhaps it was all but a dream, the memory of that old narrow vulgar time in the coarse Northern town, when the youth of genius was still only dreaming of a career ; that time when even love itself seemed a burden to an ambitious young man determined to dazzle the world, and still kept back by the clinging arms of his tender wife. All that ought to be a dream—ought to be only as smoke and cloud in the career of a great man, to be puffed away from the memory and regarded as nothing. Montana made up his mind. He put it to himself in one moment and in one phrase. The phrase suddenly rose up in his mind, and it nearly came to his tongue. It satisfied him ; it suited him as well as a code of morality. The phrase was this : ‘ The man who would do great things belongs to the future, not to the past.’

Montana stood erect upon his platform, determined to belong to the future not to the past. He saw his father's eyes fixed on him with intense and wistful eagerness. He could see that Clement Hope was striving to keep the old man quiet, probably until some seemly moment should come for a meeting between him and his supposed son. He could see astonishment in the eyes of many people. He could see Lady Vanessa Barnes look up to him with amused curiosity in her looks. He turned his eyes composedly away and began his discourse.

The discourse was surely very eloquent. It must have been. It told of 'the continuity of the human race.' It established the principle that men in this world, and in whatever world, are capable of working in constant unbroken co-operation; that the workers in other spheres are influencing us by their help and sympathy and their encouragement if we be only worthy

to receive it ; and that we in our turn can spread the widening circle of our influence to realms of whose composition and population we have no conception now. To some of his listeners it seemed an almost angelic eloquence. Montana's voice was so sweet, sonorous, and musical ; his action was so graceful, his look was so intense, that some who gazed on him and listened to him seemed to be lifted into a higher and a purer atmosphere than that of the common day. Some there were, probably, even in that hall, who found a certain difficulty in understanding what Montana was talking about, who did not quite see that he had clearly made out an immediate connection between themselves and everybody else in all creation, and who even had a sort of doubt as to whether Montana really knew much more about all the other worlds he was describing than they did themselves.

Perhaps, if Clement Hope had had a mind

free to pay any attention to the subject, he might have become a little sceptical too ; but happily for his continued faith in his leader, his whole soul was absorbed in the effort to keep Mr. Varlowe in decorous restraint. He was so agitated and perturbed by what had happened, and what he feared might again happen, that he had no thought for the words of the orator. The sweet full voice sounded in his ears, but brought with it no meaning to his senses.

As for Sydney Marion, she tried to catch a gleam of distinct meaning now and then, honestly tried, and honestly reasoned with herself as to whether it was not her stupidity, and whether, after all, the people around were not right, and the discourse was not eloquent, entrancing, exalting. But it came to an end without having convinced her that she was wrong.

Lady Vanessa listened with good-humoured indifference—that is to say, she listened to a passage now and then, but, as she did not care

much about the continuity of the race, she allowed her thoughts to wander away to anything else. The incident which preluded the discourse astonished her for a while, but she assumed that it was really only the case of some crazy old man whose admiration for the great Montana had led him into some ridiculous demonstration. That sort of thing, for aught she knew, might be one of the ordinary ceremonies of the Church of Free Souls. She remembered having been taken when she was a child to some sort of church or meeting-house, or religious assemblage of some kind, where an old woman got up and sang a queer crooning chant in the middle of the ceremonies, and nobody seemed shocked or even astonished. Therefore, for all she knew, grey-haired men might be crying out symbolical recognition of imaginary sons at every meeting of the Church of Free Souls. Such might, in fact, be only the accepted way among that congregation of expressing admiration for

Some kindly wonder and curiosity were expressed in it as well. He almost stopped for a moment as he was about to leave the room, in order to turn one other glance upon the old man who had so strangely interrupted his discourse. Every one saw Montana thus employ his sympathetic eyes; and many thought it but another evidence, if such were needed, of Montana's tenderness for all men. There were persons who might have been so vexed, even preachers and professed ministers of religion, by any interruption of the kind as to lose patience and pity for the author of the disturbance. But Montana had only sympathy and kindly feeling for this foolish old man, who had so nearly turned the whole proceedings of the day into ridicule.

Why did a sudden ray of strange conviction pierce into the perplexity of Geraldine's mind just at that moment? She never could tell; but the expression on Montana's face, which

deceived so many others, carried instant enlightenment to her. She felt sure that the old man was Montana's father, and that Montana knew it. This had not occurred to her at first. She thought, like everybody else, that the poor old man was simply the victim of an hallucination born of his love and his hope. But Montana's expression as he looked across at Mr. Varlowe seemed to strike home to her very heart with the conviction that he was acting a part. The expression was so carefully, so artificially adjusted for the occasion, as it seemed to her, that it could only be put on for the purpose of playing out a part. It may be that she was helped to this belief by the striking likeness which she suddenly saw in Montana's face and figure to the face and figure of the old man who claimed him as a son. Mr. Varlowe was but Montana whitened with the hoar-frost of time. Montana was but a dark-haired and cold-hearted Mr. Varlowe.

Geraldine felt terribly satisfied of the truth of her conviction; terribly, because there was something appalling in the belief that such a man was an utter impostor, and that nobody would believe it but herself, and that she would have to be that very day, almost every day, in his company.

As Montana passed out of the room, he fixed on Clement a special look of affectionate interest and sympathy. Mr. Varlowe gazed wistfully after him, and made a movement as if he would leave his seat. Clement quietly kept him in his place. Geraldine could see that to Mr. Varlowe's start and gaze of imploring affection Montana only responded by the same look of interested kindliness and commiseration, the look of one who feels for some apparent delusion or sorrow on the part of a perfect stranger. Geraldine felt as if the blood in her veins were turning chill.

Montana remained in his room alone until

the short service was over. He was waiting with quiet composure, although with a mind far from quiet, for the inevitable moment, not many moments off, when he must be confronted with his father. The time came. A knock was heard at the door. Montana opened it, and his father and Clement Hope came in. Mr. Varlowe began in his rough Northern way :—

‘You don’t mean to say you don’t know me, Edmund, my boy? You don’t mean to say you don’t recognise your father? You are Edmund Varlowe. Good God! of course you are. I’d know you among ten thousand.’

Montana turned to Clement and looked into his eyes. Clement’s own gaze had wonder and bewilderment in it. Montana looked him full in the face, and shook his head with a kindly commiserating expression. ‘This is Mr. Varlowe, your father?’ he asked of the young man.

‘Yes,’ said Clement; ‘he thinks you are his son.’

‘Thinks he is my son!’ Mr. Varlowe exclaimed; ‘God! I know he is my son. Do you think I could ever be mistaken? I have waited, and watched, and prayed for him to come back these years, and I knew he would come back. I knew he would come all the time, and I knew him the moment I saw him come into that pulpit to preach. Why won’t you speak? Why won’t you say you know me?’

‘My dear old friend,’ said Montana sweetly, ‘I am sorry, so sorry, to have to disappoint your hopes, your very very natural hopes, to see your son. Assuredly you will see him one day yet—pray Heaven you may. But you are mistaken about me. I am not your son. I could wish I were, to be the son of so fond a father, and to be able to give him back the hope of his life; but you will trust to a better

and a higher hope than I can give you. I am not your son.'

Mr. Varlowe threw his arms wildly out, as if he would call all the world and all nature to bear witness for him in his extraordinary bewilderment.

'Well,' he said, 'this beats all! This is what I have been waiting for and praying for these years. This is what I have longed for; and now it all comes to this! My son comes back, and he don't know me, and he won't know me! What are you ashamed of, Edmund? Do you think I am poor? I am not poor. I have plenty of money. Do you think I will trouble you or interfere with you? I will not. You may have any career you like now. I will help you to it. You shall have all my money. You shall have anything. Don't say you are not my boy. Don't, don't say it!'

Montana shook his head sadly and sweetly.

He felt no mental or moral difficulty, now that the step was taken. He had decided that he was not the son of the old livery-stable keeper, and, in his present condition, that decision had settled everything. He felt no trouble of conscience, but was serenely satisfied with himself. He was sorry for the old man, but it was only as one is sorry for somebody in a play, or at most is sorry for some stranger whose grief one sees and pities, but cannot share.

Clement tried to draw Mr. Varlowe away.

‘You had better come, father; and don’t you think you ought to say something to Mr. Montana to explain your mistake? You see it is a mistake now, don’t you?’

‘It is not a mistake,’ Mr. Varlowe exclaimed in a thundering voice, smiting the floor with his stick. ‘I never was mistaken; I could not be mistaken in my boy. That is my Edmund, though he casts me off; and he is my Edmund still, though I cast him

off now. Come away, Clem, my lad. You are my son now, and you alone; but as sure as God's in heaven, that man there is Edmund Varlowe, who was the son of my wife, Catherine Varlowe, and of myself; and all the world will know it one day just as well as he knows it now. Come away, lad.'

CHAPTER XVI.

‘ALL FANCY-SICK SHE IS.’

MONTANA got into Lady Vanessa's carriage. He was to have luncheon with her and her husband that day. Lady Vanessa chaffed him saucily and even rudely about the old man who had claimed him as a son. She had little idea of the mischief she was doing. Any chance that there might have been of Montana's returning to a sense of honour and duty was lost on that drive to Lady Vanessa's house. Montana began to hate the sprightly lady in his heart, but to hate her with a strange blending of admiration, and even with a throb of passion that was not hate. There was something so new to him

in the sensation of being thus chaffed and laughed at by a handsome woman, that it gave a strange turn to his thoughts, and opened a new spring of excitement in his chill and lonely career; chill in the midst of all outer excitement and inner emotion, lonely amongst incessant crowds. He felt curious longings to be revenged on the sprightly lady, and knew for the first time the bitter-sweet sensation that comes to a man when he is angry with a woman and yet is forced to admire her.

He went home that night in doubting mood, unusual to him. He began to feel that his way was slipping from beneath him; or at least that he himself was slipping away from the path he had marked out. He found that there were emotions which could disturb him still, and which had nothing to do with his own career and public work. He had believed himself absolutely unimpassioned;

master of all his emotions, capable of controlling not only every look, but every thought, and already he found himself distracted from the straight path by the strange and, as it seemed, almost fatal admiration he felt for Geraldine Rowan. And now for his further confusion came the cross-light of a new sensation far inferior in intensity and very different in colour, but strong enough to perplex and dazzle for the moment—a flame of petulant emotion towards a pretty, saucy, young, aristocratic woman; a fear of her, and a longing to obtain some sort of mastery over her.

Montana began to think it would be well for him to set about his great scheme, to put it in motion, and make a grand triumphal departure from London with the close of the season, carrying Geraldine Rowan with him as his wife and as the companion of his expedition, his associate in the foundation of the sublime colony beyond the seas, out of which

a new world and a new life for the old world were gradually to arise.

Did Montana really believe in this scheme? That, we suppose, no one can ever know. It is not likely—at least, from what was afterwards discovered, it does not seem likely—that he had ever thought the matter deliberately over, or had done more than allow the idea to grow upon him from day to day. He believed very thoroughly in himself, and believed that anything he started must come to a success. He had worked himself into a Napoleonic faith in his star, and in Heaven's special protection of him. This faith may have been born of sheer vanity, or of prolonged mental strain almost approaching to a condition of intellectual derangement, but at all events it supplied him with any quality of earnestness which he could be said to have possessed. Whatever the strength of his faith, either in his project or himself, it does not appear that at this time he

was making any preparation to carry his great scheme into effect. He listened to people's suggestions concerning it, and answered all manner of inquiries and letters. He gave everyone to understand that the scheme was growing into active movement day by day, and that he had all its details under his own eyes and in his own hands; but nobody was ever admitted to genuine confidence with him, nor did he tell anybody what his preparations were. He was merely at present enjoying his success in his own fashion. He had found a career, and this was its zenith and its consummation. His strongest ambition all his life through had been to play to one great audience, that of London; to fashionable, aristocratic, wealthy London in the stalls and boxes, and artisan, hard-handed, poor-living London in the galleries. Now he had reached the height of his hopes. With one hand he grasped the West End and with the other the

East. His vanity ought to have been almost satisfied. If he was capable of deliberately thinking over a difficulty or a crisis of any kind, we might assume that he went calmly and fully into counsel with himself, reviewed his position, and set his plans out before him to look at them. We might assume that, having done this, he had come to the conclusion that the zenith of his London career had in any case been reached; that even if nothing out of the common had arisen, his object now must be to avoid the risk of a descent or an anti-climax; and that the incident in the church had hastened the necessity for bringing the London episode to a conclusion. On the other hand, anything like a hasty departure from London would only give the appearance of probability to the most improbable story—Montana had now really worked himself into a mood to regard Mr. Varlowe's story as monstrously improbable—and make people

lose faith in him. The conclusion to which Montana came was that he must stay in London to the close of the season and then depart. But it is not likely that this conclusion came by virtue of any slow and careful process of thought. It came to Montana by instinct, as most of his conclusions did. That was his way. He had no thought of a resolution one moment, and it was a fixed resolve the next. It pleased and comforted him to think that these instinctive and somewhat feminine conclusions were special revelations—the voices of oracles speaking within his breast and guiding him aright.

The little incident in the Church of Free Souls did seem likely to have a certain influence over public opinion. It got about in all manner of more or less distorted versions. In no case did it amount to anything much more than the fact that there had been a scene in the church when Montana spoke there, and

that some old man, whom nobody knew, had professed to recognise Montana as his son, and that Montana had disclaimed him. There was not much in that, perhaps, and very few people went into the question seriously enough to ask themselves whether the old man was sane or insane, or whether there was the slightest foundation for the idea he had taken up. Still, the incident was of a certain importance. It called sharp attention to the fact that there was some mystery about Montana's career which might not be a great and superb thing after all. The stream might, if traced back to its source, be found to arise in a commonplace little well in a stable-yard, instead of a dark and sacred spring among the solemn trees of some historic and haunted grove. The story set curiosity and inquiry going in that direction, and that in itself was not ominous of good for Montana. It indicated a new turn in public opinion. Up to that time, people who

disputed about him had only disputed as to the man himself, his earnestness, his sincerity, his eloquence. Now they began to ask, 'What is he, after all? Where does he come from? Is his own account of himself the true one?'

Lady Vanessa told the story wherever she went, embellishing it with heedless humour here and there. From her lips it became a story of grotesque and Hudibrastic drollery. It told of a whole service suddenly disturbed, an entire congregation startled, first stricken with amazement, and then convulsed with laughter; of an orator and a prophet interrupted in the full flood of his discourse by a maniac, who insisted on rushing into the pulpit with him, clinging round his neck, sobbing on his bosom, and claiming him as his long-lost son. Lady Vanessa admired Montana in her own peculiar way, which had nothing whatever of coquetry about it; but

the delighted in making fun of him and trying to make him look ridiculous. It was a real pleasure to her, the sense of power which she felt when she could succeed in making so conspicuous a man—such an idol of society and of the people—seem an object of laughter. It gave her the same sort of delight that some people get from annoying a favourite dog, or from putting ludicrous ornaments on a pet cat.

If things went on like this, people would soon begin to insist on questioning themselves and their friends as to the exact meaning of some of Montana's sayings, and the precise practical nature of that scheme for a new world which he was understood to have in hand. Vaguely, strangely, a sense of the growing danger appeared to creep in upon Montana's mind. He began to feel it as one even in a well warmed and curtained room grows to be conscious of the presence of the

east wind. He became impressed with the necessity for doing something—what, he did not yet exactly know. Montana was a man who, when brought face to face with a difficulty and compelled to act, would always act with wonderful quickness, energy, and courage. As indolent men of a certain class are surprisingly energetic when they have to shake off their indolence and do something, so Montana, a born dreamer of the unimaginative order—a man who could dream about himself for hours and days, and contemplate himself, his career, and his soul, as an Indian fakir contemplates his body—had, when brought face to face with the necessity for action, the instinct of a commander and the eye of a pilot. He was conscious of this himself, and therefore never troubled himself about decisions and plans till necessity brought the moment of making the decision and announcing the plan.

The incident in the Church of Free Souls

had much disturbed some of the inmates of Captain Marion's household. Geraldine kept silent about it. She would not give any opinion. Melissa raged and blazed against the silly old man who had presumed to interfere with Mr. Montana, and she somehow seemed to take Clement Hope into her wrath, and to regard the whole thing as a device in which that luckless young man had been directly and malignantly engaged. Katherine was on the same side, but she was more timid about expressing her opinions. She seemed scared—an unusual thing for her—and cast furtive, almost fearful, glances every now and then at her husband, as if she were actually beginning to be afraid of him. Mr. Trescoe, indeed, came out also in a new light. He spoke with an energy that no one ever before had supposed him to have. He boldly and bluntly denounced Montana as a 'genuine humbug,' declared that he had not the slightest doubt the

old fellow was his father, and a deuced deal too good a father for such a charlatan, and prophesied that before three months were over Montana would be known to everybody as a quack and a sham. These fearful opinions were combated with such anger and contempt by Melissa, that Captain Marion had to beg of Trescoe to discontinue his attacks in order to save Melissa's temper, and spare the nerves of the company. Captain Marion himself was clear and satisfied in his mind. Montana said the old man was not his father, and there was an end of the matter. The old man had been such a long time hoping and praying for his son's return, that he was ready to accept any good-looking stranger as the long-lost heir. The wonder was, Captain Marion said, that he had not found somebody to take the place of his vanished son long ago. Whatever Montana said must be true. Captain Marion was not even annoyed or offended by those who did not

agree with him on this point. It was settled and certain.

Mr. Aquitaine came suddenly up from the North, and heard the description of the whole incident. The description, it must be owned, was given with very different colouring, and even very different array of facts, by the various people round Captain Marion's table. Aquitaine looked grave. He did not put away the whole affair as a trivial and unmeaning incident. In the North he had been making special inquiries about the young man who had once been employed in his house, and who was undoubtedly Mr. Varlowe's son. There were some clerks in the offices who still remembered young Varlowe clearly enough. They all bore testimony to one set of facts: that he was very tall, dark, singularly handsome, with strange abstracted manners, and apparently an inordinate self-conceit and belief in himself. These statements set Aquitaine

thinking. Now, when he heard that Mr. Varlowe had actually claimed Montana for his son, it did not impress his mind as absolutely certain that the old livery-stable keeper was labouring under an hallucination. This seemed to him to suggest some terribly momentous possibilities. If Montana was a deceiver in this, in what else might he not be a deceiver? It was now certain that, besides the hundreds and thousands in all classes who had faith in him, and would trust anything to him, some of Aquitaine's own nearest and dearest personal friends were ready to put their property, their lives, their happiness, almost their very souls, at his disposal. Up to this time Aquitaine had not the faintest notion how things were going with his own hapless little daughter. It was only when they discussed the question in Captain Marion's house at luncheon, and when he saw the girl's flashing eyes and quivering lips as she maintained Montana's perfect

nobleness and integrity, it was only then that a suspicion shot into his mind, and made him ask himself bitterly why he had felt so much surprise that Marion took so little heed of his daughter Katherine and her too open devotion to Montana.

Aquitaine was prompt in action. He went at once to Melissa. He found the girl in her room, and opened his subject with a certain sternness very unusual for him in his dealings with her.

‘Look here, Melissa,’ he said. ‘I want you to be more careful than you are in the way you talk about Mr. Montana.’

Melissa started, and turned her eyes upon the carpet. Her lips trembled.

‘I don’t like to hear any girl,’ he said, ‘talking with such open admiration and rapture about a man, and making herself his champion and his devotee. Besides, there is something I have heard about Montana—well, no, I won’t

say that; not that I have heard anything against him, but something has come to my mind that makes a sort of doubt—and it may be right, or it may be wrong—but anyhow it is not well, in the mean time, that you should get your name mixed up with his.’

‘Oh, papa,’ said Melissa, ‘what are you saying?’

‘Well, my dear, I am saying exactly what I think. Anybody who heard you raving about him to-day, before all those people, would think you were some silly girl who had fallen in love with the man and had not the sense to conceal it.’

Melissa looked up at first, red and angry, and Aquitaine expected one of her familiar outbursts of temper, but to his surprise her pretty little face became contorted, and she burst into tears.

‘Why, what is the matter with the child?’ her father said. ‘I have not been saying any-

thing very dreadful, Melissa. I am only giving you advice.'

She covered her eyes with her handkerchief, and only sobbed out :

'I never saw you angry like that with me before. I'm not used to it.'

'Well, well, my dear, I don't mean to be angry with you, but I want to impress you with some sense of the necessity of being a little careful. I quite understand a girl's admiring a man like Montana, and of course he is twenty years at least older than you are, and I dare say you don't think any harm about going into any raptures about a man of that age. But don't do it, my dear ; be a little cautious. I can't tell you exactly what I am thinking of, and there is not very much to tell ; but I am not quite certain about Montana, and I have given Marion a caution, though it won't do him any good, and his daughter Katherine makes exhibitions of herself almost as bad as '—he was going to say

‘your own,’ but he stopped out of tenderness for poor Melissa’s feelings. He was a resolute man, however, when he clearly saw his way to anything, and he now saw his way very clearly to the necessity for checking Melissa’s public displays of her admiration for Montana.

‘Fact is, Mel,’ he said, ‘if you don’t be a little more careful, I should think the best thing would be for you to come back with me to the North as soon as possible.’

She started at the words. Aquitaine saw with pain that the suggestion was a terror to her. She did not want to go home. It had come to that. Well, he must make allowances. London in the season is London in the season, to be sure, and girls will like parties and balls, and the opera, and visits, and all the rest of it as long as grass grows and water runs, and the best of parents must be content to put up with the knowledge that his daughter can get on very well without him, and be very happy away

from home, when her home is not in London,
So he only winced, and pulled himself together,
and was good-humoured as before.

‘If you like to stay till the end of the season, Mel,’ he said, ‘you shall do so, my dear, but only on this condition, remember. Just bear my warning in mind. Don’t make a display of your admiration for our friend. It is a very natural admiration, I am sure, and in one way I am glad to find that you can admire anybody so much as that ; and I did not think it, somehow, once ; and I ought to be glad of it, and I am glad of it in a way ; only, don’t show it, my dear, don’t show it so much.’

CHAPTER XVII.

GERALDINE'S EXPEDITION.

Now, there was nothing in all this conversation, one would think, that ought to have brought positive terror to the girl's breast. Nobody could know better than Melissa how little likely Mr. Aquitaine was to treat her with harshness; and, after all, even the most maidenly and modest of girls need not feel utterly humbled because her father has given her a caution not to talk too rapturously of a distinguished public man. One can easily imagine a very well regulated and orderly little girl losing herself in wild avowals of admiration for Mr. Gladstone, or Mr. Browning, or Mr. Henry

Irving, ~~or~~ Sir Frederick Leighton, and being bidden by her father to rave an octave or so lower in general company, and not feeling utterly crushed by the rebuke. But the moment Mr. Aquitaine had gone, Melissa threw herself down on the floor all of a heap, and bemoaned herself there for a while, cowering like one in physical terror. Then taken with a sudden thought, she jumped up, shook out her betossed skirts, dashed her hair into something like order, ran to Geraldine Rowan's room, and knocked at the door.

‘Let me in! Quick! quick! Let me in!’

Geraldine opened the door, and let the alarmed girl in.

‘Oh, Geraldine!’ she exclaimed; ‘I have done a dreadful thing. You must help me; you must do something—I don’t know what; but you must get me out of this scrape. I am in such a fix! Oh, why did I ever do it!’

‘What have you done, dear?’ Geraldine asked, really alarmed at the girl’s manner.

‘Such a dreadful thing! Oh! how can I tell you? But I had better tell you than anybody else. You must get me out of it. You must! you must!’

‘But what have you done, my child?’

‘I have written to Mr. Montana. I have written a mad love-letter; I have put my name to it; and I have told him I’ll go anywhere over the world with him, if he’ll let me; follow him as a page, if he likes—I think people did such things in books, didn’t they?—or I’ll—I’ll—I’ll marry him, if he likes—if he will have me!’

‘You have not written this dreadful stuff to Mr. Montana?’

‘Oh, haven’t I, though! Yes, but I have; and I have signed it with my name. Oh! I’ve been and done it this time, Geraldine; and won’t there be a row in the building when my father comes to know!’

‘What on earth possessed you to do such a piece of madness? Why did not Mr. Aquitaine take you home long ago, or stay here to look after you? Why did not you tell me what you were going to do?’

‘Well, it’s partly your fault,’ said Melissa, flashing up; ‘and so you are bound to get me out of this fix.’

‘Partly my fault?’

‘Yes, I say it is your fault; and it’s *all* your fault. You are to blame for the whole of it. Why did you go on so—condemning Mr. Montana and running him down? You might have known it would have set me off wild in the other direction.’

‘But I did not condemn him,’ said Geraldine; ‘I did not run him down.’

‘You sat and listened, and looked on approvingly, while Mr. Trescoe—that fool, that dull, silly, weak creature!—yes, you listened while he ran Mr. Montana down; and you

agreed with him, and you agreed with his doubts, and you agreed with everything that was said against him ; and what was I to do ? Of course I wasn't going to stand that. I resolved to show him that I, at least, did not doubt him ; and there—that's why I did it ; and you are to blame, and you must get me out of it now.'

'What can we do ?' Geraldine said, almost in despair.

'I don't know,' said Melissa, sitting down now rather composedly, and nursing one knee between her two little hands ; 'but you have got me into it, Geraldine, and you must get me out of it, and that's all about it.'

Geraldine thought the matter out as well as she could, her face puckered up with anxiety, and resting her chin upon her hand. A general on the eve of a difficult campaign, or a judge perplexed by some most exasperating point of law, could hardly have had a brain more per-

turbed by the difficulties and responsibilities of the hour. 'When did you write this letter?' she said at last.

'Oh, I don't know; about an hour ago, or it may be an hour and a half, perhaps, or two hours; before luncheon—before papa came and talked to me. He has been talking to me. Did I, or didn't I, tell you? Yes, he has been advising me and talking to me; and I know, if he found out this, things would be bad. It must have been an hour and a half ago, I think.'

'How did you get it sent to the post?'

'Well, I had it in my pocket when Sydney and I walked out to-day, and I just stayed a moment behind her at the corner of the street, and dropped it into the letter-box there.'

'Good gracious!' said Geraldine; 'what deceits and dodges one gets into!'

'Never mind what one gets into,' said

Melissa ; 'get me out of this now ; that is more to the point.'

A wave of inspiration tossed up a purpose in Geraldine's mind.

'He may not have got it yet,' she said. 'We'll get it back from him, Melissa. I will go myself and get it back.'

'Oh, will you?' said Melissa, her eyes brightening up with hope and wonder. 'Will you have courage? Will you do it? Have you the nerve? I know you American girls will do anything ; but can you do this?'

'I have nerve enough when I want to help a friend out of trouble,' said Geraldine ; 'and I am not an American girl, Melissa, but I have learnt in America not to be ashamed or afraid of doing anything that is right. Girls in America are brave and free, and they are only taught to be afraid or ashamed of doing what is wrong.'

Then she stopped and began to feel rather

ashamed of preaching at the poor little offender before her, but Melissa had hurt her by speaking of American girls as if they were girls who would do anything without regard for the proprieties. 'Yes, I will go,' Geraldine said again; 'we may be beforehand with the postman. Mr. Montana may not have got it.'

'If I could get it back again,' Melissa murmured piteously—'if I could only be certain that he had not read it, I am sure, Geraldine, I'd never do such a thing again; at least, I think I wouldn't; oh, indeed, I do; I think I would not do it again.'

'I am sure you would not do it again,' said Geraldine. 'I would not do what I am going to do for you if I thought there was the least chance of your attempting such a thing any more.'

'Well, don't preach, there's a good girl,' said Melissa; 'I never could stand being preached at.'

Even in all her gratitude to Geraldine she could not subdue her mutinous inclination, and would not be preached at.

‘I am afraid preaching does not do you good,’ Geraldine said softly; ‘perhaps you are not much worse than many of your neighbours in that way. Anyhow, Melissa, I will run the risk. I will go to Mr. Montana. I will not trust to sending anybody. Nobody must know about this but you and I and he, and if I can, he shan’t know your name.’

Yes, Geraldine thought to herself, I will go. What does it matter? It is not anything wrong. What if people do think I am American in my ways, and that I venture to do things that English girls would not do? I don’t care. This is not venturing very far, after all, to pull a friend out of a trouble; and if anyone finds out that I have done so, and is angry with me, or thinks badly of me, well—I can bear it—I’d do more than that to help poor Melissa.

One hour and a half in the day Montana kept for himself and his few especial friends. That was the time from half-past five to seven. The general public were shut out at that time, and Montana was shut in. Those who were able to see him then were the favoured intimates to whom he had given the *consigne*, and who would come and talk to him in a friendly way about anything or nothing, and smoke a cigar with him. It was a great privilege to be amongst those who were admitted to Montana's hour of privacy. Montana took care to give admittance in such a manner as to make it evident that he was not distributing his favours only amongst the powerful and the great. Some of his poorest and humblest followers had the pass-word. Women as well as men were privileged. It was not long before Lady Vanessa established for herself and her husband the right of entry, and she sometimes came even without her husband, and talked with Montana and

whoever happened to be there, and occasionally smoked a cigarette in her affable and familiar way. Young men who could get admittance at this special hour were proud of it, and talked of it a great deal amongst their friends.

Now, as chance would have it, this was the very time of the day when Geraldine had to make her visit to Montana. She thought she could get to his place easily, speak to him, and get back again before it was time to dress for dinner. There was not a moment to be lost. She hurried downstairs, and went her way with heart high beating, it must be owned, but very resolute and quiet, determined to put the thing through, and not to let poor Melissa get into trouble because of any fearfulness or hesitation on her part.

Montana had just entered his little reception-room to wait for any of his friends who might come, when he was told that a lady wanted to see him. He replied that he was

engaged, and at that hour could see no one. The servant came back with a still more pressing request from the lady to spare her a few moments.

Montana asked, would the lady favour him with her name?

Reply : 'No, the lady would rather not, but she could say that he knew her very well.'

Montana looked at his watch, and saw that it yet wanted a minute or two of half-past five. Perhaps nobody would come very punctually. He might get rid of this unusual visitor in good time. 'Let the lady be shown up.' To his surprise, when she came into the room, he saw that it was Geraldine Rowan. But if he felt surprise, as he certainly did, he took care not to show it. He advanced to Miss Rowan with so easy and friendly a manner that she might have thought he was expecting her, and a looker-on might have supposed that her visit to him was

the most ordinary and natural thing in the world.

Geraldine felt greatly reassured by this, and there was something so gracious and kindly in his smile that she began to understand dimly what was the meaning of the sort of fascination he seemed to exercise over so many men and women. They shook hands; Montana placed a chair for her, and said he was glad to see her, in a tone admirably suited to encourage confidential communication, although neither in tone nor in look did he show the slightest appearance of one who expects a confidence, or who regards the whole meeting as other than a commonplace friendly visit.

‘Mr. Montana,’ she said—and then she stopped for want of breath, and for a moment it seemed as if she really could get no words to go on with. Then she braced herself, and tried to find deliberate utterance. ‘Mr. Montana,’ she went on, ‘you will think it very

strange that I have come in this way to see you, and I think it strange myself.'

Montana only said, 'I am not likely to think anything strange that Miss Rowan does ; and besides, strange things are often the right things, and I am sure whatever you do is done with a right purpose.'

'Thank you,' she said, and she really felt grateful to him for the manner in which he had relieved her of some of her embarrassment. 'I shan't keep you long.'

'That,' said Montana, 'is an ungracious beginning.'

'I shan't keep you long,' she repeated. 'I have come to ask you a favour, Mr. Montana. Perhaps it is an act of justice. It ought to be. But I don't know, and I am quite willing to put it as a favour.'

'I only hope it is something very hard to do, so that I may do it, and show that I am not unworthy of being asked.'

‘It is not hard to do. It ought not to be hard to any man, and I should think it ought to be least of all hard to you. I put it as a favour. I don’t come to you willingly, Mr. Montana ; I don’t admire you, and you know it. I don’t believe in you, whatever other people may do.’

‘You will believe in me one day,’ said Montana composedly, ‘and you will help me, and join with me. That is as certain as the rising of the sun to-morrow.’

She looked at him with something like contempt. ‘I don’t believe in you now, at all events,’ she said, ‘and I am more than ever convinced that I am right by things that have lately happened. I don’t believe you are what you say you are ; at least, I believe you are what you say you are not.’

Geraldine looked straight into his eyes to see if any sign of embarrassment or surprise might be found there as she spoke these

audacious words. But the eyes returned her look with that calm, grave, sweet expression which was always in them. 'If Montana is an impostor,' she thought, 'he is well made up for his part.' The truth was, that Montana had prepared himself again and again for every possible utterance of this kind from every conceivable person, and was as little likely to be put out now as a trained actor on the stage is put out by the speech of the theatric opponent which gives him his cue.

'Tell me,' he said gently, 'what is the favour you want of me? if it is in my power, you shall have it all the same, whether you believe in me or not. How you act towards me could not be any guide for my acting towards you. The less you think well of me, the greater is my anxiety to show that I don't deserve to be thought badly of.'

'Well,' she said, 'I want to get from you a letter which you must have got to-day. I want

to get it from you unread, if you will give it to me ; but read or not, I want it back again.'

Montana now looked a little surprised. 'Certainly,' he said, 'you shall have any letter that I have received which concerns you in the least. But I have read scores of letters this morning already, and I don't remember one of them in which you could have the slightest interest. However, I give you my promise that you shall have any of them, or all of them, if you are in the least inclined.'

'Perhaps you have not read this one yet?' she said. 'You have letters still remaining, perhaps, unopened?'

'A good many,' he said with a melancholy smile. 'The opening and reading of letters is one of the weariest occupations of my life. I sometimes feel inclined to wish there were no post-office. See, there is a heap of letters already lying on this table by the last post, which my secretary has not touched as yet,

nor I. Will you look amongst them? Do you know the handwriting of the letter you speak of?’

‘I do, very well.’

‘Is the writer a man or a woman?’

‘It is a girl,’ Geraldine said, with some hesitation.

One little gleam of curiosity and surprise did actually come into Montana’s eyes. ‘Will you tell me,’ he said, ‘why you want the letter back?’

‘Oh, no,’ she said, ‘and that is another favour; pray don’t ask me. I beg of you not to ask that. Think I am unreasonable; think I am ridiculous; think I am out of my senses, if you like, but grant me this favour. Do let me have the letter, and don’t ask me anything about it.’

‘By all means,’ Montana answered. ‘Look amongst these letters, and take away any one you like.’

Geraldine tried to be cool and composed. She turned the pile of letters over and over, and sought out the one she fain would have. It was not there. No address was written in any handwriting in the least like that of Melissa Aquitaine.

‘It has not come yet,’ she said, ‘but it will come. I don’t know what to do.’

‘What is this terrible letter?’ Montana asked. ‘You see, if you give me any description by which I may know it, I can look for it, and will take care that it is sent to you. Or would you rather come here after the next post or two and try again?’

‘Oh, no,’ she said. ‘I can’t come again.’

‘Can’t you give me any idea of what sort of letter it is, or what it is about? Surely you may trust me so far as that?’

‘I must,’ said Geraldine, rather dolefully. ‘I must trust you. I can’t come again to-day, and the letter will certainly reach you some

time to-day. It is a letter in the handwriting of a girl who has written you ever so many letters before—letters of admiration, and homage, and that sort of thing. You may perhaps know the handwriting; I beg you, if you do, to send me back that letter unopened.’

‘I don’t remember any one handwriting in particular; I receive a great many letters from women, and let me say, Miss Rowan, not a few of them are foolish letters. Do I know the writer of this letter?’

‘Pray don’t ask me anything,’ said Geraldine. ‘The writer of the letter now wishes she had not written this last one, and I want to get it back.’

Montana stopped for a moment, and a sudden expression came over his face which made him look as if he had grown ten years younger. ‘Can it be possible,’ he said, ‘that you have yourself written these letters, Geraldine, and

that you now repent, and want this one back ? If this is so, pray, pray let me recall my promise.'

'I have not written the letters,' said Geraldine, with a scornful ring in her voice ; 'I never wrote such letters, and I should never be likely to write any such—to you, of all men in the world. The foolish child who did write them has at last been wild enough to tell you her name, and I want you not to know her name, and if you will give me back the letter—well—I shall thank you, and say that you are perhaps better than I thought.' She got out the words slowly, one by one, with difficulty and hesitation. 'But if you won't give it back to me, then I can't help it—keep it—I have no more to say.'

'You are angry with me,' Montana said gently, 'and I don't wonder. I was wrong to think that you could have written such letters. I know you would not ; much as I want you

to think well of me, I don't want you to express a kindly feeling in such a way as that. You shall have the letter, of course. I don't want to read the poor girl's nonsense. I don't want to know her name or who she is. I should give her good advice, if I knew her, and try to reason her out of her folly. What do I care about the admiration and the rapture of women? I would rather have one kindly word from you than the homage of all the other women in the world.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT.

WHAT Geraldine might have said in answer to this declaration she did not herself know, for at that moment the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Lady Vanessa Barnes and her husband. The tall handsome lady seemed to fill the pretty little reception-room as she came in with her strong, graceful movement, every motion as she walked seeming to tell of careless, unconscious strength, and her face lighted with animation, high spirits, and curiosity.

Mr. Barnes, her husband, was a young-looking, slender, somewhat timid man, who always seemed as if he were trying to escape

from notice behind his wife's petticoats. He was a man of intelligence and ability in his own way, a keen financier, a reader, and almost a scholar ; but his business in life now was to be overshadowed by his wife, and it was his pleasure too. To rest in her shade made him happy. She was very fond of him, and he knew it, and liked her to have her own way in everything.

Lady Vanessa fixed her eyes inquiringly on Geraldine, and after the interchange of a few words with Montana, she turned to the girl and said :

‘ I always remember any face I see, and I have seen this young lady somewhere—at the Church of Free Souls, or whatever you call it. Am I right, Mr. Montana ? ’

Montana presented Geraldine. He was glad Lady Vanessa had come. Her coming prevented Geraldine from replying to his declaration. It compelled her to receive it without a protest. That was something.

‘Yes, I thought as much,’ said Lady Vanessa. ‘You are the young American girl, ain’t you?—some one told me you were.’

‘No,’ said Geraldine, ‘I am not an American. I have lived in America, but I am an Irish girl.’ She usually had to explain about three times a day that, although she had lived for many years in America, she was nevertheless not an American.

‘Oh, an Irish girl?’ Lady Vanessa said. ‘I see—yes, exactly; that is why you are so good-looking. They say all Irish girls are good-looking, don’t they?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Geraldine.

‘But you know that you are good-looking,’ said the pertinacious lady.

‘I don’t,’ said Geraldine.

‘Come, now, is that true?’

‘Quite true,’ replied Geraldine boldly. ‘There are different ideas about good looks; I don’t admire myself.’

‘Oh, you don’t? Mr. Montana does, I dare say.’

‘Everyone does,’ said Montana. ‘All who know Miss Rowan admire her.’

‘Well, I am sure I admire you already,’ Lady Vanessa said. ‘But, where did you get that pensive look in your eyes? You look as if you were dreaming.’

‘I am short-sighted, and I suppose that gives one a dreamy look.’

‘Then, I wish I were short-sighted,’ said Lady Vanessa. ‘That is exactly the sort of look I should like to have. Don’t you think so, Albert? Do look at Miss Rowan’s eyes, dear. Isn’t there a wonderful expression in them?’

Mr. Barnes looked, not very boldly, into Miss Rowan’s eyes and said, Yes, there was. Quite so. Exactly.

Geraldine felt embarrassed—an unusual thing for her. She was not embarrassed in the

least by Lady Vanessa's questions or compliments, but by the whole situation, by Montana's recent words, by the knowledge that the moments were passing rapidly away—so rapidly, that she must get back soon—and that she had not got the letter.

She must go. Other visitors would come, and it was impossible that Montana could now satisfy her request. She rose to go. She cast an appealing look at him. Despite his recent declaration, she had to appeal to him still, for Melissa's sake. She hoped he would understand her look, and come with her out of the room, and let her exchange another word with him. He did understand her, for he rose to accompany her to the stairs. But as she was going, Lady Vanessa stopped her with a friendly hand.

'Look here, my dear young woman,' she said, drawing Geraldine aside; 'I must give you a piece of advice; you are from America,

and girls do as they like there. You don't understand our ways. You must not come all alone here paying visits to handsome men like Mr. Montana. That will never do. People will talk about you. Don't be offended. I give you the advice for your good.'

'I am much obliged to you,' said Geraldine coldly. 'I think I can take care of myself.'

'Awfully proud,' said Lady Vanessa. 'I see ; all right, dear ; I mean no offence.'

'Indeed, I have not taken offence,' said Geraldine, recovering herself, and pleased with the frank ways of the eccentric lady.

'You see, I am older than you,' said Vanessa.

'I don't think you are, really,' Geraldine answered, 'if it comes to that.'

'Well, I'm older in experience ; I'm married ; I am well up in all the ways of our world here, and I know what people would say.

I never care what they say of me, to be sure ; but that's a different thing.'

'Why is it so different ?' Geraldine was too ingenuous even to suspect that Lady Vanessa meant to say, 'Because I am a great lady and you are not.'

'Oh, well,' and Vanessa laughed ; 'because, don't you see ? I have caught my fish, child, and you haven't—at least, you haven't hooked him yet. That's how it is.' She gave her husband's arm a good-humoured squeeze. 'This is my fish, don't you see ? I've hooked him.'

Then Lady Vanessa and Geraldine both became aware that a new visitor was entering the room—a visitor of a very different class from any to which the Duchess of Magdiel's daughter was accustomed.

We have already spoken of the wrecks coming to the shore, Montana being the shore to which they drifted. Amongst the wrecks

which thus came floating towards him was that of a family in the East End, the family of a fanatical poor working man, a member of a small odd sect of Peculiar People, or such-like, who in an early chapter of this book has been described as attending Montana's first lecture in London, and going up to him and making his acquaintance—what time the Duke of Magdiel was coldly repulsed. Poor Matthew Starr was a fanatic of benevolence, a furious devotee of equality and of purity, a virtue's Quixote in the East End of London, and in a ragged moleskin jacket. A waif and wreck of the ancient Chartist days, he had spent his life working hard, rising early, resting late, suffering want, weariness, disappointment after disappointment, seeing the light of every hope go out one after the other, and still living and feeding on his faith in an impossible future of happiness and equality and goodness for the living world. He might in other days have

been a martyr—perhaps a Stylites. Fate had sentenced him to drudge in Whitechapel, to marry a stupid little girl who in the end took to drink and died of drink, to have a crowd of children depending on him, and whom he had to trust to the nursing of chance, or strangers, or each other, or anybody, during his long daily work. They grew up, and most of them turned out as he would not have them. Two of the boys went into the army, and he hated soldiering with a passionate intensity of hatred. War was to him only murder on a large scale. A soldier he regarded simply as Cain in a red coat. Another son became a servant, a footman; and if there was anything which Matthew Starr hated almost as much as a soldier, it was a lacquey. Two of his daughters had become domestic servants. For one of them he had succeeded in getting a place in a milliner's shop, and she presently went terribly astray and wandered the streets at nights, and poor

Matthew Starr was as much of a fanatic for purity in women as he was for peace and goodwill in men. Still, he remained hoping on, believing in the good time coming, passionately longing for some new world and new life under other influences and other skies. When Montana came to London and divulged his scheme, it seemed to Starr as if heaven were opening to him—at least, as if heaven had sent to him this man with a special commission to lead him out of the darkness and despair of his London life into light and happiness.

Montana smiled on him with that sweetness which passed with so many of his admirers for an almost divine beneficence. But, to do him justice, he did not merely smile; he was really kind to poor Starr. The one thing that the old man would most wish to have done for him, Montana did. He found out the lost daughter, and talked to her gravely and sweetly, brought her back to her father's house, and undertook

to find for her some fitting occupation until they could go out to the happy new world where all was to be well. Not without trouble did Montana get Starr to receive his daughter back again. All his authority was needed to enforce it, though when it was done the man seemed to soften to the girl, even more than might have been expected, and to cling to her with new passion of love and hope. As for her, she soon wearied of the narrow miserable home where she hated to live. She hated a life of monotony. She was only kept from tearing herself away and going back to her old ways by her belief in the happiness that was in store for them when they should become members of Montana's new colony. Montana had often pictured for them the life that was to be in that new place, where all were to be equals, and all were to have work enough, and only enough, and ample leisure, and means to live, and amusement, and no care ; no mists and fogs and

cold skies over them, no mud under their feet, no dark, dull houses around them, no tenements crowded with hard-working, hard-drinking lodgers and screaming children. The man and the girl lived on the hope of this new life, he because it was to be a life of equality, and purity, and progress, and she because it was to relieve her from the monotony of her present existence, and because it offered her some prospect of variety, and colour, and amusement, and perhaps—for she never followed very closely Montana's somewhat vague descriptions—some promise of money, fine clothes, and frequent visits to a theatre.

Mr. Starr was for modestly drawing back when he saw the ladies, but Montana called to him to come in, and he entered with a look half timid, half defiant, at once shy and fierce—awkward in the presence of the well-dressed women, angry with himself at the bare idea that they should think he was awkward, and deter-

mined to make it plain that he was not. He looked with a glance of especial defiance at the tall and imposing Lady Vanessa; and as she returned his look with an expression of amused curiosity, he set her down at once as an enemy. He turned a sharp glance upon Geraldine; but as her eyes only looked softly into his with the dreamy expression of short sight, he assumed that she felt rather kindly towards humanity in general, and was inclined to like her.

‘I am glad to see you, Starr,’ said Montana, shaking hands with the old man cordially, and favouring him with a specially sweet smile. ‘How is Fanny? does she get to like her work any better?’

‘Fanny don’t like her work,’ and Mr. Starr shook his head; ‘she don’t get reconciled to it, somehow; she don’t like the being up early and down late. She don’t like the regular hours. She’s not been used to it, poor thing, so

long as I have. The unicorn, Mr. Montana, don't like to abide by the crib, does he?'

There was a certain half-educated dignity about Mr. Starr's style of speech and about his fanatical free-thinking. He read the Bible a good deal, and admired its language and its illustrations. He read Shakespeare and Milton, and Paine's 'Rights of Man,' and the 'Vestiges of Creation,' and the essays and speeches of Mr. W. J. Fox.

'No,' said Montana, 'she is young. We must make allowance for her, Starr, must we not?'

'We must, Mr. Montana, and we do. I am sure you do. We must get her away out of this. When we have her out in your grand new settlement under the bright skies, and where there is a life to live for, I think she will settle down then and be a fine woman yet; I do. But I long for it. When is it to be, Mr. Montana? Do tell me!'

‘Soon,’ said Montana, ‘but not too soon. We cannot hurry the movement of events.’

This was oracular, and it was all that Starr could get to satisfy him. He sighed. Then, suddenly looked up, he asked, ‘There ain’t no delay, Mr. Montana? no putting off? nothing you did not expect?’

‘All,’ said Montana, ‘is going on exactly as I expected and arranged.’

‘Thank God!’ said Starr. ‘But I am disturbing these ladies,’ he added, for he saw that Lady Vanessa seemed about to go. ‘I am intruding, maybe? I will go.’

‘Pray don’t go for me,’ said Lady Vanessa; ‘I am going myself.’

‘This is a friend of mine, Lady Vanessa,’ said Montana; ‘Mr. Starr, an honest, capable working man, a credit to his order, a man who has educated himself, and has had a hard struggle with life and fate.’

‘I am glad to know you,’ said Lady Vanessa

good-humouredly ; and her husband expressed equal pleasure in knowing Mr. Starr, but he thought to himself that surely Montana was an odd sort of person.

‘I don’t think you are glad to know me,’ said Starr, addressing Lady Vanessa, and ignoring Mr. Barnes altogether. ‘You are a fine lady—a great lady, I dare say. What should you be glad to know me for? You are the enemy of my class. You would be my enemy if I was worth it, but I am not.’

‘Starr, my dear friend!’ Montana said, interposing.

‘Look here, you know——’ said Mr. Barnes.

‘All right, Albert ; never mind,’ said Lady Vanessa. ‘I don’t mind in the least. I like our friend to have his say out. Why shouldn’t he? Well, Mr. Starr, why do you call me the enemy of your class? I don’t want to be anybody’s enemy, I am sure ; and I don’t think I am—except my own, perhaps, sometimes.’

‘You and your class are our enemies,’ said Starr. ‘You keep us down, and grind us, and crush us, and keep us from our rights. You have the land and the money, and you live in fine houses, and you wear grand clothes,’ and he waved his hand towards Lady Vanessa as if he were specially pointing attention to her garments, and calling the world to witness that his words were true; ‘and we starve, we work morning and night, and our girls suffer—they go wrong, maybe.’

‘I like arguing,’ said Lady Vanessa. ‘One does not often find anybody to argue so stoutly as our friend. But now, look here, my good man; I couldn’t help being born what I was any more than you. What good would it do to you if I didn’t wear good clothes? You wouldn’t take money, I suppose, if I offered it to you?’

‘No,’ he said; ‘no man ever dared to offer me charity, and I hope a woman wouldn’t do it.’

‘Then, what could we do for you?’ she asked bluntly.

‘Anyhow, you have all the money and all the good things, and you keep them; and we have no share, and we have as good a right to them as you; and we work, and you do nothing. I don’t mind the Queen—I don’t find fault with the Queen,’

‘Well, that’s considerate,’ said Lady Vanessa, with a laugh.

‘No, I don’t; she has some work to do, anyhow. She has business set out for her; she has duties, and she does them. I don’t say that I think the country wants such duties; but they are given to her, and she does them, and she has a right to her pay; and I am told she is a good woman, and minds her children—or did mind them when they were young. I find fault with you—you and your lot. You have no duties. If you had, you wouldn’t do them.

You have nothing to do but take your money and spend it.'

'You ought to like this young lady,' said Lady Vanessa. 'She is a Republican; she comes from America.'

'Do you come from America, ma'am?' said the old Chartist, turning to Geraldine, his eyes suddenly lighting.

'I have lived a long time in America,' she said. 'I don't know whether I am Republican or not. I am Republican for America, certainly; but I have not thought over the matter very much for any other place, Mr. Starr. Are you a Republican?'

'Oh, yes!' he said. 'I live for Republican principles. I'd like to die for them. I live in the hope of being one day in a Republic—in Mr. Montana's new Republic, and with him for president, and us all equal. I shouldn't care to live another hour if it were not for that and for Fanny—that's my daughter, miss.'

‘Is she ill?’ asked Geraldine; because she fancied, from his manner of answering Montana, that she must be.

‘She is ill, ma’am; not in the bodily sense so much—although she is delicate a good deal—but she is restless; she is unhappy.’

‘May I go and see her?’ Geraldine asked, in her usual impulsive way.

Mr. Starr looked uneasily at Montana. ‘Well, I’m sure I don’t know, miss,’ he said. ‘Maybe it would not be right of me to bring you to see her.’

‘Oh, if it’s anything like fever or that, I don’t care a straw—I mean, I’m not afraid. I have done all sorts of nursing; I never got any harm.’

‘No, miss; no, it is not that; she is not sick in that way. But I don’t think Mr. Montana would like you to know her, perhaps.’

‘But,’ said Lady Vanessa, ‘this young lady is a Republican and a Democrat, don’t you

know. She hasn't any of my odious class prejudices ; she is not your daughter's enemy. I suppose it would be no use for me to ask to go to see her. But I would if you would let me.'

Mr. Starr looked into the great lady's eyes, and really saw only a kind of blunt good-nature there.

'Well,' he said, 'I don't believe you are half as bad as you seem. I dare say you would do a good turn for anyone ; and it isn't your fault, as you say, that you were born a curse to the world—I mean your class, ma'am, not yourself. I dare say you are a kind-hearted, honest sort of woman. But it was not about that I was thinking when I did not want this young lady to come to see us. You are not married, ma'am—miss, I mean?'

'No,' said Geraldine. 'What would that matter?'

'Are you married, my lady?' he got out

the title with great difficulty, and as an absolute concession to Lady Vanessa's personal good-nature.

Yes, Vanessa assured him that she was married.

'Well, I don't know,' he said; 'you are both of you very kind; but I can't say. I'll ask Mr. Montana about it.'

'And Mr. Montana will let me know,' said Lady Vanessa; 'and if there is anything at all I can do to show that I am not the enemy of your class, Mr. Starr, I'll do it.'

Lady Vanessa and her husband went away. Some other people came in.

'I will go to see your daughter, Mr. Starr,' said Geraldine, 'if you will give me your address. I shan't wait to ask Mr. Montana. Republican girls from America, you know, don't ask anyone's authority to do anything.'

It was not possible for Geraldine to wait any longer. She was palpitating with anxiety

at having to wait so long ; and she had still to speak again with Montana about Melissa's hapless letter. When she left the room, Montana went with her. In her anxiety about Melissa, she had almost forgotten the very direct avowal of admiration and something more which he had so lately made to her.

But Montana was calculating upon all her movements. He knew what an advantage he must have in the fact that she had, as it were, to condone his declaration of love, and to talk with him in the closest confidence after he had made it and she had heard it. Even if he had now in his hand the letter which she was so anxious to get, he would not give it to her just yet. It had still a purpose to serve.

When they got outside the door, she asked, 'What *am* I to do, Mr. Montana? You cannot give me this letter——'

'I have not got it,' he said. 'Can you wait? You might wait in one of the other

rooms. Nobody will come there ; and as the letters come, they shall be shown to you. You can wait in the room where the letters are always brought.'

'I can't wait,' she said. 'It is impossible. I must go back.'

'Shall I come and see you to-night, and bring the letters with me ? I am going to dine out. I will call afterwards and ask for you.'

She thought over this for a moment. 'That would never do,' she said. 'I should not be able to see you without making people wonder and suspect something.'

'Then, will you come and see me here late to-night ? It does not matter. We understand each other. Nobody will know.'

'Oh, I couldn't do that,' said Geraldine. 'That is beyond even me, Mr. Montana.'

'Can I send you the letter ?' he asked. Then he stopped suddenly and said, 'Of course I can't do that ; I don't know the handwriting.'

Besides, if it really is so serious a thing as you think, we had better not let anybody into it. Will you send your maid here at ten o'clock to-night? The last post will have come in, and the letter must be here then if it is to come at all.'

'I haven't a maid,' said Geraldine. 'And even if I had, I should not like to let her into all this. I don't want to bring other eyes on me. I couldn't send Miss Marion's maid or—anybody's.'

She was going to say 'Miss Aquitaine's,' but stopped so significantly that Montana, if he had been the dullest person in the world, could not have failed to know why she forbore to utter that name. He had not guessed before who his mysterious correspondent was. It was clear as light to him now.

'I can only think of one other plan, Miss Rowan. Don't be alarmed. It may look very dreadful, but it is not. I shall leave the place

where I am dining, early, and get back here, and get whatever letters there are in anything at all like a woman's handwriting. I shall walk into Berkeley Square. Will you find some way to come there at ten o'clock, and you shall see the letters and take the one you want? Come, I can think of nothing else but this. It is not a bad plan, and, after all, mysterious meetings are best carried on in the public street. Don't be afraid. If you really are anxious about the letter, this is the only thing to do.'

Geraldine turned it over in her mind as quickly as she could. She thought it did seem the best thing to do. To call again the next day, or to get him to send her letter after letter on the chance of its being the right one, or to wait any longer for any cause, seemed most unwise. In the depths of her heart, she did not trust Montana far enough to leave the letter too long in his possession. 'I have to

get it,' she thought to herself. 'I have set my heart upon it, and I will not stick at a trifle to succeed.'

'Yes, Mr. Montana,' she said at once, and quite composedly, 'I will see you in Berkeley Square at ten to-night. Good-bye, until then.'

She was not five minutes from Captain Marion's house, and we may be sure she lost no time on the way. She exchanged a hasty word with Melissa.

'It will be all right, Melissa. I haven't got it yet——'

'Oh, you haven't got it?' Melissa said discontentedly. 'I thought as much!'

'But I shall get it, you sceptical little girl; you shall have it to-night.'

It was only when she got to her own room, and was hastily dressing for dinner, that Geraldine began to reflect on the wild escapade she was engaging in, and in the fact that Montana had made to her something very like a

declaration of love, and that she had not repelled it.

Mr. Longfellow, in his charming 'Hyperion,' compares something or some line of argument to certain roads in the wilder parts of America which begin broad and clear, and gradually get narrower and narrower, becoming a mere footpath through a forest, and at last dwindling away into a squirrel track and running up a tree. Curzon Street, Mayfair, is not a little like a road of that description. Opening broadly enough out of Seamore Place, it goes a stately way about as far as Queen Street, and then it gets smaller, dwindling down after it passes Clarges Street, and wandering through little shops and stables, until at last, when it has crossed Bolton Street, behold, it suddenly becomes Lansdowne Passage, a narrow paved walk between two high walls, which may perhaps for the purpose of our comparison be accepted as the equivalent of the squirrel track.

Lansdowne Passage has the early Georges in every brick and paving-stone. It is only a few feet in width. It is paved like the floor of a dungeon, and the walls that gird it in are of appalling height. There is a little gate at each end, a sort of little turnstile which does not turn, and there is a little flight of steps at the end that opens upon Berkeley Street just where Berkeley Street touches Berkeley Square ; and as one passes through, he might fancy he hears the rustle of the dresses of the prim ladies in the early Georgian time, and sees the stiff stocks and pigtails belonging to the military heroes of that period. Lansdowne Passage tells of the Georges as Kensington in some of its old quarters tells of Queen Anne, or the Tower reminds us of Mary and Elizabeth and Jane Grey.

Geraldine Rowan, although, as we have said more than once before, delighting in all the associations of early London, and loving to

find everywhere some memory of a great name, or a past day, or a pretty story, was not concerning herself much about Georgian times or any reminiscences that might properly belong to the little pavement she trod when she entered Lansdowne Passage at ten o'clock that quiet beautiful summer night. She was only thinking of the venturous expedition she had come on, and the strange risk she ran. This was a very different thing from calling on Mr. Montana in the bright bustling hours before dinner. This expedition was under cover of night, although a night well moonlighted, and there was mystery about it. It had the air of an assignation. It could hardly be justified in the eyes of any sober and prudent elders whatever. Hardly, she thought, would her own mother have easily pardoned her for doing such a thing as this. And yet, what else could she do? She had thought the matter over again and again, and there seemed no way out

of it but to make this venture. There was no other hope of extracting poor Melissa from a difficulty that indeed might come to be a great danger in the end. Geraldine felt that she was really running a risk, possibly making a sacrifice, to help her friend, and that thought made her only feel proud and resolute. She would not turn back now. She would see the thing out, come of it what might.

Mr. Montana was punctual. Geraldine had hardly emerged from Lansdowne Passage into Berkeley Street when she saw that he was waiting at the corner of Berkeley Square. He came towards her at once. Just at that moment it so happened that Lady Vanessa Barnes was returning in her brougham from a dinner-party, and on her way to spend the evening in one of the streets near Berkeley Square. Montana had sat next her at dinner that day, and she had particularly asked him to come and talk to her in the drawing-room afterwards. He had ex-

cused himself saying he had to leave early, and had not appeared in the drawing-room at all. Lady Vanessa was vexed, found the affair dull, and left early. Now she saw Montana standing at the corner of Berkeley Square as if waiting for some one. She made her coachman drive slowly; she was a young woman endowed with much curiosity, and not always particularly scrupulous about the gratification of it. In a moment she saw a woman come out through the gate of Lansdowne Passage, and saw Montana hasten to meet her. They began to walk slowly round the square, on the path by the gardens, where a great plaster nymph or naiad, or some such personage, is doing something with an urn. Lady Vanessa drove round the square two or three times, and still saw them walking slowly, apparently in deep and confidential conversation. Once the girl looked round, and might have seen Lady Vanessa, but that Lady Vanessa drew back. Lady Vanessa

saw her plainly. She was astonished, shocked, highly amused.

‘So this is my little American girl,’ she thought as she drove away, ‘who is so highly independent of the world’s ways, and knows so well how to take care of herself; and this is my saintly Montana! I shall open that girl’s eyes a little, and let her see what a silly thing she is doing. I think my saint might have more sense, at his time of life, than to make midnight assignations with a girl in a square in London.’

It was not exactly midnight, but midnight would do well enough for Lady Vanessa.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN BERKELEY SQUARE.

MONTANA had seen Lady Vanessa just as well as she had seen him. His quick eyes were not likely to miss her. He was looking out for possible observers of himself and Geraldine in their late evening walk ; and when he heard the wheels of a carriage, he naturally looked that way. He saw Lady Vanessa, and saw that she had seen them, and he was very glad of it. It exactly suited his purpose. She was just the person whom he should have liked to see Miss Rowan and himself together, in that strange mysterious way, towards nightfall. When Geraldine met him first, he led her at

once to the path beside the railings of the Square gardens. 'Nobody will see us here,' he said; 'this place is very quiet. Come; here are the letters. Luckily for us, the moon shines brightly enough, and you can easily find the one you want.'

He put a little bundle of letters into Geraldine's hand. She turned them hastily over, and was not long in finding the one she sought for. She felt her mind immensely relieved. She had got it now, and poor Melissa's secret was safe.

'I am really grateful to you, Mr. Montana,' she said, and she felt all she said. 'You have relieved me from a great anxiety, and enabled me to keep my word.'

'It was nothing,' he said; 'and even if I had read your friend's letter, it could not have fallen into better hands. I should have respected her confidence, even though I thought her foolish. But confess, Miss Rowan,

that it is rather an odd freak of fate which makes so many women send me declarations of love that I don't want, while the only woman I care about repulses me.'

'I am much obliged to you, Mr. Montana,' she said again. 'I must go now.'

'No,' he said, 'you must not go just yet. We will walk round this place for a little. I want to talk to you. I am glad of the opportunity. I want to talk to you seriously. You are not a sentimental and foolish girl, and you are not afraid to hear the truth. I must go back again to what we talked of to-day.'

'Pray, don't go back to it,' she said. 'Don't let us say anything about it. Let me leave you now with this feeling of real gratitude to you. I have done a very odd and rash thing in coming to meet you here—don't make me sorry for doing it.'

'The thing is too serious,' Montana said quietly, 'for little scruples about forms and

proprieties. I am glad to have you here alone, because I must speak again of what I began to speak to you about to-day when Lady Vanessa interrupted us. I must put it in plain words. I want you to be my wife, Miss Rowan. I think you are the woman in all the world who is fitted for me, and for the kind of work I have to do and the kind of life I have to lead; and so I put this to you plainly, and at once. I have no time for formal courtship and love-making, but I tell you that I am in love with you; and, much more than that, that I believe you are necessary to me and to my life, and I want you to be my wife. Don't answer at once. I want you to think this over. Every day you think it over, believe me, you will find yourself growing more and more reconciled to it.'

'Oh, it is impossible,' she said.

'Just let me tell you,' he said, 'some of the advantages—not that you much care about

ordinary advantages, I know; but there are some things that every woman of spirit and sense must care about. You are not rich, I know: I have heard that your mother is poor. In the ordinary course, you would have perhaps a hard enough struggle with the world, and I hate the idea of a girl like you, who is worthy of some high destiny, having to struggle with the world. Well, I am rich enough. I have a good deal of money. Money comes to me somehow, although I never went out of my way to get it. I never made money-getting any part of my ambition. But I am rich enough, and you could live in a way that would become you. And I am a success. I have made a name, and you would be known everywhere. More than all that, I have a great work to do, and you should share in it.'

'What is the use of all that?' Geraldine asked. 'It is thrown away on me, Mr.

Montana. I don't even feel grateful for it, as I ought to do. It doesn't touch me. I am not afraid of a struggle with the world—not in the least. My mother would rather bear anything than that I married anyone for whom I did not feel——' and then she stopped, embarrassed.

'You may speak out as plainly as you wish,' he said with his usual composure. 'You can't tell me anything I don't know already. I understand your feelings towards me quite well.'

'Then, if you do, we needn't talk any more about all this,' she said vehemently. 'If you know all that I feel, you can't want any answer from me. You know how little chance there is of my—of my doing what you wish me to do.'

'I know,' Montana calmly answered, 'that it is almost as certain as the rising of to-morrow's sun that you will be my wife.'

Montana thoroughly enjoyed this struggle

between will and will. He did not by any means feel all the confidence in his ultimate success that he professed ; but he well knew how much, in such a contest of resolve between man and woman, the man gains over the woman by the firm and repeated assertion that she cannot possibly escape him. In every act, and almost in every secret thought of Montana's, there was the same blending of reality and of play-acting. It was true that he had long convinced himself that the high destinies intended Geraldine Rowan to be his wife, and that she was needed to his career. So much was true—so much at least was the fanatic's dream ; the rest was play-acting.

‘I don't ask you for an answer now,’ he said.

‘Let me answer No !’ she exclaimed. ‘Oh, let me answer No, once for all. I shall never give any other answer—unless I am bewitched. Do, Mr. Montana, I beg of you, take my answer

now, and let us be done with all this. I never could care about you, Mr. Montana—to marry you, I mean. I must speak the truth; something in you repels me.'

'I know that quite well,' Montana answered, with his quiet smile. 'I know why it is. You shrink back for a while because you know you cannot help yourself.'

There did seem to be something of this kind in Geraldine's mind. Her dislike of him did always seem to be compounded with a certain dread that he would one day or other come to have an influence over her.

'I don't care,' he went on, 'for the sort of thing that commonplace people call love. I might have had enough of that. I don't care whether the feeling you have now to me is like that which any girl just out of school may have for some young man. I much prefer your feeling of repulsion and fear.'

'Fear? I have no fear. I am not afraid

of you, Mr. Montana—no, not in the least. Why should I be?’

‘ Oh, yes ; you *are* afraid. You are afraid that I shall prevail in the end. You know I shall. You can’t escape, Geraldine. Do you remember the first night I saw you ? It was on the deck of the steamer as we were leaving New York bay. The moment I saw you I said to myself, “ That is the woman destined for me ; there stands my wife.” ’

He took her hand, and held it.

For the first time she began to feel afraid of him. There was something in the expression of his eyes that compelled her to quail. It seemed as if he were becoming a reality instead of a sham. A soul was growing evident within him. Can one clearly realise what the sensation would be if, as he was looking on some theatric representation of a ghost, some poor magic-lantern illusion, some Polytechnic combination of glass and cunning reflection, the

thing began, beyond doubt, to turn into a very ghost—a spectre with wan eyes and bodiless frame, the stars shining through it; an impossibility, yet a terrible, unmistakable reality, sending a shudder through every nerve of those who thus saw in their very presence the natural put on the supernatural? If one could imagine what the sensation of such awe-stricken spectators would be, he would have some idea of the feelings of Geraldine Rowan as her strange admirer held her hand and claimed her. The clasp with which he held her was not that which Geraldine would have supposed the grasp of a lover. It was not palpitating and tremulous, as with hope and fear and poetic tenderness. It was a cold, strong, stern grasp, quietly masterful. If Fate were to assume a bodily presence and take hold of a victim's hand, such perhaps would be its gripe.

What was that look in Montana's eyes? Geraldine had always thought that, despite their lustrous darkness, Montana's eyes were

shallow, merely glittering, soulless. Behind the shining surface there seemed to her to be nothing. Now there was indeed something looking ominously out from a depth she had not thought of. Was it the light of passion, of unconquerable resolve, of high purpose? Was it—the thought passed quickly through her—the light of growing insanity? She felt as one might feel who, glancing carelessly into some cavern which he has passed and glanced into every day, becomes suddenly aware that his look is answered from the darkness this time by the burning eyes of a crouching tiger.

If Montana had known what was passing in Geraldine's mind, he could not have better chosen the words with which he broke the moment's silence. It was only a moment's silence, long as its strain seemed to Geraldine's overstrung nerves. The little second-hand of her watch had not made one round before Montana spoke.

‘I believe there is a fate in this. It is your

destiny, Geraldine, as well as mine. You can't escape it. I have tried many things, and never failed in anything yet. I shall not fail in this, believe me.'

She did not resist his holding her hand. Had he given a warm lover-like pressure, she would at once and instinctively have torn her hand away. But it was still the same quiet, unmoving grasp—like that of some instrument.

'I don't believe in talk about fate and destiny,' Geraldine said, keeping up her courage and composure as well as she could, but almost feeling as if she were beginning to have an uncomfortable belief in destiny all the same.

'Nor I,' Montana answered. 'I was only using the words that people commonly use. What I mean is, that I have always found a Higher Power directing me in every step I have taken, and I find it now. I never make plans and schemes as ordinary people do ; I don't want them. I wait, and my course is directed

for me. When the moment comes, I always know what to do. I am guided, I have been guided, to you from the first.'

'Oh, pray, Mr. Montana, don't talk of a special providence and heavenly guidance about such poor things as the fortunes of you and me. It makes me shudder; it sounds like blasphemy.'

'Do you think heaven is farther off from us now than it was in the days of the prophets?'

'No, I don't; but—I don't know. The same things don't occur, and anyhow we are not prophets, you and I'—she suddenly wished she had not coupled herself and him together in the word 'we'—'at least, I am not a prophet, Mr. Montana, and I don't believe that you—I don't believe there are prophets now.'

'There is need of guidance for men and women now as much as ever—ay, far more need than there was in the days when men were known to have speech of angels. Well, you will think this over; there is time enough.

Remember, it is a great destiny to which I am calling you. Yours will not be like the life of an ordinary woman ; no, not even if she were a queen. What could a queen do like the work you will have to do? You will help to found a new civilisation. Your name will be famous all over the world. Perhaps you will be the first woman who ever vindicated for woman her true place in the great work of the world.'

'I don't believe I am worthy of any such high destiny,' Geraldine said, forcing a smile. 'You must find some one else, Mr. Montana ; some woman who would be equal to such a place, and who would like it. I am not equal to it, and I shouldn't like it.'

'You don't yet know your own capabilities : who ever does until the moment comes?'

'The moment has come now for me to go away,' she said, 'and to get home. I ought not to have come. You have made me more sorry than ever that I did come ; but I would venture

a good deal for a friend. I ought to thank you, Mr. Montana, I know, and to feel grateful to you. I am sure many women would think this the very height of their ambition. But it is not for me, and I thank you as much as I can. I will thank you with all my heart and soul if you will only say that we shall not speak of this any more.'

'We need not speak of it very often,' he answered. 'I shall only remind you of it when the time seems to me fitting. I am satisfied; I know that every day's thought you give to this is sure to work for me, and I know that the more you try to avoid thinking of it, the more it will be in your mind. Now I don't mean to keep you any longer. Shall I see you safely to your door?'

'Oh, no; please don't. Let me go alone. I shall be quite safe.' She was already hurrying away, her whole horizon now being bounded by the mere hope of escape for that once.

He bade her 'Good-night' quietly.

She hurried home in terror and a kind of shame. She gave Melissa her ransomed letter, and listened patiently to Melissa's interjections, partly of gratitude, partly of petulance, and made hardly any reply. She was inclined to say more than once, 'You don't know what it may have cost me to get you back that foolish letter which you wrote in your absurd transport.' But she repressed herself and said nothing of the kind. She felt like one who is in possession of some guilty secret, like one who has entered into an alliance with unholy and supernatural agents, and for whom henceforward the real world loses its firm reality, by whom anything may be expected, however strange. She was bitterly angry with herself for not having more vehemently and finally rejected Montana's appeals, and broken off with him once and for all. But she had committed herself, she felt, in asking him to return Melissa's letter. She had put

herself into a secret alliance with him, and from that moment had to treat him with consideration and the semblance of gratitude. What distressed her especially was the secret, inexplicable fear that perhaps she might not be able to hold herself aloof from him in the end. Perhaps he might get such a control over her, and so isolate her from other sympathies and other confidence, that she might actually have to yield and marry him in the end. She did not allow this terror to get hold of her without reasoning stoutly against it, and telling herself again and again that the time of witchcraft is passed, as well as the time of dragging young girls to the altar willy-nilly. She tried to laugh at her own fears; told herself that as long as she was determined not to marry Montana, Montana could not possibly marry her. But all the same, she saw how fate and her own fault, or her own quixotic generosity, or whatever it was, had brought her into a relationship with Montana

which she could not at one time have believed possible ; how he had made use of it to bring her and him into at least a momentary isolation from the rest of the world ; and how she had more than once that night felt her spirit quail under the influence of that strange look which he fixed upon her. She had no friend to whom she could speak her mind, and the night was distressful to her, and she woke in the morning with a strange sensation, as if her old world had slipped away from her altogether and left her drifting in chaos.

CHAPTER XX.

A BREAKING-UP.

FOR several days Captain Marion and his household had heard nothing of Clement Hope. It seemed to Geraldine that his absence and silence were ominous. It occurred to her that something must be the matter with Mr. Varlowe. She said as much to Captain Marion. Captain Marion was on the point of leaving town with Mr. Aquitaine for the northern city in which Aquitaine lived. They were going in obedience to a telegram from young Fanshawe. Fanshawe, when he heard of the incident in the Church of Free Souls, had naturally been aroused to keen interest and

anxiety about it. If Mr. Varlowe's belief were not a delusion, then this Montana, this mysterious preacher and prophet and leader, must be the husband of his dead sister ; and, if so, what a profound impostor he must be ! Fanshawe was determined if possible to find out the truth of the matter, and he hurried off at once to the town of his birth—where pretty Miss Fanshawe had lived, and fallen in love, and married, and died. From that town he now sent to Captain Marion a telegram begging him to leave London and join him there at once, and Marion and Aquitaine were going this evening by the five-o'clock train. The women were to be left alone, except for the companionship of Mr. Trescoe, who was a moody companion enough these last few days. Something had come over him. He was not like himself. He was silent, and sometimes almost stern, and now and then made Katherine short answers, which were new to her, and to which she did not reply

with any of her usual spirit. There was something strange and cowed and fearful about Katherine's manner of late. She was wont to rule over her husband with the most undisguised sway. He used to live under a petticoat government open and avowed. His wife did not make the least affectation, as some judicious women do, of being the ruled while actually the ruler. She apparently took rather a pleasure in letting everybody see how completely her husband was her subject, and he seemed to enjoy his subjection. But things had changed these last few days. She was fearful; he was sullen.

‘I wish we had not to go on this business,’ Marion said. He and Aquitaine and Trescoe were together. ‘I don't like it. It seems like a sort of detective job. It looks as if we suspected Montana of something.’

‘And don't we?’ Trescoe asked.

‘I don't; and I'm sure, Frank, you don't

either, if you would only let your true nature have its way. I wouldn't stir a step in this business of Fanshawe's, only that I want to have the satisfaction of seeing his suspicions proved to be ridiculous, and of telling him so. Of course it is excusable enough in him to be astonished and alarmed and all that ; but with us it is different.'

'But look here, you know,' said Aquitaine, 'it is a terribly serious business for us all, as well as for Fanshawe. It might not be any matter in itself whether this fellow was Edmund Varlowe or was not ; but it is a tremendously serious thing if a man who has such influence, and is carrying on the great enterprise he talks of, and entangling the fortunes and whole future of thousands of men and women, should turn out to be an impostor in anything.'

'I don't know what you are all about,' Marion said uneasily ; 'you are all down upon Montana. I never saw such a thing. I fully

believe the man is as true as steel and as open as the sun. It is his very nobleness of character that gets him such enemies.'

'Come, now,' Aquitaine interposed good-humouredly, but with a certain firmness of tone, 'you ought not to say that to us, Marion. You ought not to say that we don't like the man because of his nobleness of character.'

'Oh, no, no,' Marion said emphatically, 'I don't mean that, Aquitaine. I mean that his nobleness of character makes him enemies, and they send out stories about him, and fill the air with calumnies, and some of these things always stick, you know, and they impress even sensible men like yourself. I wish you could look at Montana as I do. I wish you knew him as I do, and then you would——'

'But what do you know about him?' Trescoe asked in a tone very unlike that which he usually adopted towards his father-in-law. 'You know nothing about him; you hear fine

talk, and you see that the women all round are taken with him.'

'I don't see anything of the kind,' Marion interposed; 'some of them are as unjust to him as you are.'

'I don't want to be unjust to anyone,' said Trescoe, 'but I have had enough of *him*, and I won't stand it much longer.'

'Won't stand what?' Marion asked, looking him fixedly in the face.

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Trescoe; 'or rather, I do know—I know what I mean, and I won't stand it much longer.'

He turned away and left them.

'Now, Marion,' said Aquitaine, 'don't you really see the change that is made even in that young fellow by your friendship with Montana?'

Captain Marion grew a little redder and hotter than was usual with him.

'I see that Trescoe's in a bad humour about

him, and I don't say that he's quite wrong. As you seem to know something about this, Aquitaine, and as you come to the point, I must say I do wish my daughter Katherine did not express her admiration of Montana quite so openly. I don't wonder if Trescoe is annoyed, and I think he ought to have stopped it long ago ; but then one must not blame the girl. He is very handsome, very fascinating, and kind to women in a grave, fatherly sort of way, and honourable and all that ; and you know, Aquitaine, she is not the only one.'

'No,' said Aquitaine with a sigh, 'she is not. There are others as foolish as she ; and I wish to God my little girl had never seen him : I wish to God we had all never seen him. His coming has only brought discomfort to us all, and it is well if it does not bring some unhappiness before we have done with it.'

Marion himself was not without some of the same uneasy feeling ; but he was loyal to his

friend, who, he honestly believed, was misjudged and misprized ; and he would not give him up. He thought, however, it would be well to make some change in the arrangements he had laid out for the holiday—the holiday which was to have brought so much pleasure, and which already seemed withering away into mere discomfort. He thought, perhaps, it would be well that Trescoe and his wife should go to the Continent at once, and leave the rest of them to follow : that would be something. Aquitaine, of course, could easily take his daughter home whenever he would, and that would remove another embarrassment. There would only remain Sydney Marion and Geraldine, neither of whom appeared particularly sensitive to Montana's attractions. Thus, Marion thought, things would all go right again, and he would really get from Montana a clear, precise, business-like explanation—he laid great emphasis mentally on the word 'business-

like'—of his project in all its details. Captain Marion actually felt business-like as he mentally repeated the word. It seemed to him to solve much of the difficulty. Yes, it must come to that, of course, in the end, even between the closest friends. Business-like it must be; business-like—he was resolved on that.

His daughter Katherine came upon him that moment. Aquitaine had left the room.

'Things seem pretty bad, papa,' she observed. 'I never saw Frank in such moods as he is getting into lately. He talks of taking me away to the Continent at once.'

'Well, well,' said Marion, 'I think he is quite right. I wonder he did not do it before. You know I spoke to you, my dear, about this. I told you your goings-on about Montana would never do; people would be sure to misunderstand them.'

'I am sure I don't know what I have done,' Katherine expostulated. 'You all rave about

him, or at least you did as long as you liked ; and because I can't help thinking him a handsome man and a very agreeable man, everybody is down upon me. Frank is changed altogether ; he goes on as if I had done something improper.'

'No, no, Katherine, don't talk in that flippant way ; it is painful. Nobody supposes you have ever done or thought anything improper. But it does not look well when you women get vying with each other in admiration about any man ; and I can't blame Frank for not liking that kind of thing—no husband would like it. Be a good girl, my dear, and a sensible girl, and drop it, in heaven's name ; and Frank and you will get on as well as ever.'

'I don't think you ought to listen to silly stories and scandals,' said Katherine ; 'I can tell you, papa, if you mind everything that everybody says, you would find that I am not

the only member of the family people are talking about.'

'No?' said Marion. 'Sydney in the swim too? Well, I certainly should not have thought of that.' He was rather amused than otherwise at Katherine's attempt, as he understood it.

'Oh, no, it is not Sydney,' his daughter coldly answered.

'Well, but there aren't any more of you. If it is not Sydney, I don't know who it is.'

'There is one more of us, papa,' said Katherine. 'We are three, are we not?'

'Oh, it concerns me, then,' said Marion; 'and pray, my dear, what do people say about me?'

'They say that you admire Geraldine Rowan a great deal, papa, and that Sydney and I are to have her soon as our stepmother. I am sure I don't wonder. I think she is a very good girl and a very charming girl, and I

don't see what you could do better. But if people talk about us you need not wonder, for I can assure you they talk about you just as well.'

This was a startling piece of news to Captain Marion. For a while he was silent; more than silent: he was absolutely speechless. This had never occurred to him before. He had never thought it possible that the idea would come into anybody's head. He had gone about with Geraldine just as freely as if she were his own daughter, and it always seemed to him that the mere fact of a man's having grown daughters ought to exempt him altogether from gossip of that kind. Was it possible that any people could talk in that way because he was seen occasionally with a young woman whose age was no greater than that of the youngest of his own girls?

'What stupid nonsense!' he exclaimed at last.

‘ Well, yes, of course, if you say it is nonsense,’ Katherine said, with a malicious tone in her voice, ‘ and if you really mean that. I should believe everything you said, papa, and if you say you really don’t intend anything of the kind, of course that is enough for me. But you mustn’t wonder if outsiders are not so easily convinced; and then, you know, much more unlikely things have happened. We hear every day of girls marrying men who are years and years older than you, and not half so good-looking or attractive; and I must say that our Geraldine is a very attentive girl, and does cling on to you in a very friendly, fond kind of way—highly natural, to be sure, and a proper expression of gratitude on her part; only the world is apt to think that that sort of thing sooner or later ends in a wedding-ring, don’t you know, papa. Anyhow, that is what people say, and I thought it only kindness to tell you.’

‘Great kindness, indeed,’ Marion said, ‘very great kindness, and very pleasant to hear, too. How can people say such things, and how can other people listen to them? I believe it is always one’s own family who listen most readily to any silly gossip about one.’

‘Quite so,’ said Katherine, with a sigh as significant as italics; ‘exactly; that is just what I was saying before we struck on this subject of conversation. The members of my own family were the first, indeed I think the only persons, to listen to foolish gossip about me. So you see, papa, after all, we are in the same boat. It is very sad. They talk silly gossip about us all; but it is a comfort that our consciences are at rest, and we can bear it.’

Katherine disappeared, happy at having discharged her shaft, and believing that by doing so she had secured two great objects: satisfaction for her personal anger, and immunity from

any further criticism with regard to her conduct.

The condition of things was not made pleasanter by Mr. Aquitaine's sudden announcement of his resolve to take Melissa back to the North with him. She could return to London later, he said, when they were to start for the Continent; but in the meanwhile she must go home with him. Perhaps her mother wanted her; anyhow, she must go. Melissa was not in the least taken in by the suggestion that her mother might possibly want her. Her mother had never wanted her in her life, or for that matter, wanted anybody else. To be allowed to lie on a sofa and do nothing was Mrs. Aquitaine's highest idea of enjoyment; and enjoyment with her was always a duty. Melissa knew well enough why she was taken home. She knew that her father was taking her away from Montana's presence, and that he must suspect quite enough to turn him into a

watchful guardian of her, and to make her life with him an uneasy one for the present, and something very different from what it used to be. She had, however, no choice but to submit. She did not even think of resistance. Geraldine and Sydney hurried off with her to help her in making her preparations and packing her trunks. Geraldine and she hardly exchanged a word on the subject, except once when Sydney Marion had left them together, and the poor girl clasped Miss Rowan's hand, and said, 'Oh, Geraldine, thank you ever so much for having got me back my letter! Is not my father changed? Thank God, he does not know all! Oh, here's Sydney!'

That was all that passed between Geraldine and her, but it was enough to make Geraldine feel new pity for the foolish little girl, and new gladness that, at any risk to herself, she had got back Melissa's letter.

There was a strange embarrassment in

Geraldine's manner to Captain Marion and in his to her. These two had taken so frank a liking to each other from the very beginning, that they might almost have seemed to any observer, or seemed to each other, like an affectionate father and daughter. There was something in the nature of the one specially sympathetic with that of the other. Geraldine was so much more intelligent than either of Marion's own daughters that she had obtained a sort of leadership over his sweet sunny temper, and his sympathetic but not very vigorous nature. It was strange that when they were parting now, and he was going on a journey which he thought might be productive of some momentous consequences, they two should not be confidential, should be restrained in manner to each other. Geraldine was embarrassed because of the secrets she was keeping. She felt at moments strongly inclined to unburden her mind to Captain Marion, to tell

him all, at least so far as her part of the story was concerned, and trust to him to guide and guard her. This she felt at moments inclined to do, and then shrank back from the confession. Had she been left alone with Marion at this time, it would have probably come to a disclosure of all her feelings and her troubles. But she had not the opportunity, and the condition of her mind, divided between a wish to disclose all to him, and a shrinking back from any disclosure, put into her manner an embarrassment which was almost distressing to herself, and which Marion could not but see. Naturally, after the hints that Katherine had so kindly given him, he felt embarrassed in Geraldine's presence. He had never before for one moment thought of himself as playing in anybody's mind the part of a lover and future husband to the girl. He saw Geraldine's embarrassment and assumed that it came from the same source as his own. Therefore they parted,

not coldly, but without the affectionate warmth that would have been frankly made manifest at another time. All this added new discomfort to Marion's unwilling journey North. Nor did he know how he and she were ever again to associate on the same frank, sweet, and friendly terms as those which had always prevailed until Montana's ill-omened coming and Katherine's ill-natured story.

The parting was melancholy. Everyone seemed to feel that the promised reunion of its members was a promise in which nobody believed. None of them expected to see that little group united again, or had any faith now in the long-looked-for continental trip. Katherine was perhaps the only one of the party who was a little glad at the breaking up, and whose distress, at all events, was solely on her own account. For several reasons she was glad that Melissa was going away, and would have been rejoiced if Geraldine had been going too.

‘I have written to Clement Hope,’ said Captain Marion, turning back just as he was leaving. ‘I have sent a messenger to him with a letter. I am uneasy about him and about his father. As I shan’t be here when the answer comes, one of you girls can open it. Do whatever you think best, if there is anything to be done.’

At last the parting was made. There were some tears amongst the girls and some awkwardness amongst the men, and then the separation was accomplished, and Geraldine, Katherine, and Sydney were left alone—alone, that is to say, except for the guardianship of Mr. Trescoe, who seemed only too glad to escape their company and to smoke a sullen cigar all to himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

HURT TO THE DEATH.

THE house was very dreary to the three forlorn young women. It seemed as if they were to have a dull monotonous evening of it. Sydney was out of spirits; Katherine was out of temper; Geraldine was full of nameless bodings, expecting at every moment that something strange would happen. It was not long before the messenger came back with an answer from Clement Hope. Clement's letter was short and sad. It only said that his father had fallen suddenly ill a day or two ago, and was growing worse and worse; that he began to be alarmed about him; that Mr. Varlowe would not see any

doctor, and if Captain Marion could spare half an hour it would be a relief to Clement to see him, for he was alone.

‘What is to be done?’ Sydney Marion asked, looking blankly at her companions.

‘Oh, somebody must go to him at once,’ said Geraldine. ‘You *can’t* leave the poor boy all alone in that dismal old house, with his father perhaps dying. Somebody must go to him at once.’

‘All very well, Geraldine,’ Sydney reasoned; ‘but who is to go? Papa won’t be back for days; Frank is out.’

‘Frank wouldn’t be of any use,’ his wife declared.

‘Somebody must go, all the same,’ said Geraldine. ‘I will go if nobody else does.’

‘You’ll go?’ Sydney exclaimed, amazed out of all her ideas of propriety and the fitness of things; ‘but, my dear Geraldine, you can’t go.’

‘Why not?’ Geraldine asked.

‘You don’t mean to say you would go alone and see Mr. Hope?’

‘No, I shan’t go alone,’ said Geraldine, ‘because, Sydney, you will go with me.’

‘Oh, no, dear,’ said Sydney, ‘I can’t do that; I could not do it. That would not be proper at all. It would be ridiculous. What could we do to help Mr. Hope? We could do nothing.’

‘But it is not a case of doing anything. It is a case of having somebody near him to say a friendly word. Will you come, Katherine?’

‘I think you had better go, Katherine,’ said Sydney, ‘if somebody must go; if Geraldine will have it.’

‘Indeed I will,’ Geraldine said; ‘I am going to put on my things this moment.’

‘I can’t believe that you are really going,’ said Sydney remonstrating.

‘Well,’ Geraldine replied composedly, ‘if

you will look out of the window, and will only accept the evidence of your senses, in five minutes you will see me get into a hansom cab, and if you can hear through the noise in the streets, you will hear me tell the cabman to go to Mr. Hope's house.'

'Then, you had really better go with her, Katherine,' said Sydney. 'You are a married woman.'

Geraldine smiled. 'That will give an air of perfect propriety. Come, then, Katherine; I shall be delighted to take you with me. The protection of a married woman will be an unspeakable comfort and satisfaction to me.'

'I can't go,' Mrs. Trescoe said. 'Frank may come back at any moment. He might not like it.'

'Oh, to be sure,' said Geraldine; 'he might not like it; and of course you could not think of taking any step without first consulting him, and having his permission.'

This was sarcastic. Geraldine was growing annoyed.

‘I should not like to go,’ said Katherine. ‘I don’t think I ought to go. I don’t see that it is any affair of mine. I can’t assist the young man.’

Katherine expected Montana to come in that evening, and she was only too delighted at the chance of having him all to herself, or nearly all to herself.

‘Then you won’t go?’ Geraldine asked her decisively.

‘I *can’t* go,’ said Katherine. ‘I can’t go running all over the town after everybody who chooses to fall sick. If I fell sick myself, I should not expect Mr. Hope’s father to come and see me.’

‘All right,’ said Geraldine; ‘I am going, anyhow.’

‘If you *will* go,’ said Sydney, ‘somebody must go with you, and I will go. I will do

anything rather than leave you to go alone. Yes, I will go.' She spoke with the heroic resolve of a soldier who is determined to lead a forlorn hope, even though he himself has no faith in his mission. She compressed her lips. Her cheeks were pale as she spoke the resolve to do or die. If Geraldine must rush into the jaws of impropriety, it should not be said that she rushed there alone—that no friend stood by her to save her from the danger, or to share it and perish with her. Sydney Marion at that moment knew herself a heroine.

Geraldine laughed good-humouredly at the resolve.

'Well, come along, then, as quickly as possible. There is no time to be lost. We need not spend many moments in bedizening ourselves. We are not going to a dinner-party or a ball: come along, Sydney.' She swept poor Sydney out of the room, and presently Katherine, looking out of the window, saw the

two girls get into a hansom cab and drive away.

Very dim and dismal looked the old house in the fading light of grey evening as the girls got out at the gate. There was an atmosphere of decay and of death all around it. The gravel crunched under their feet with a melancholy, disheartening sound that brought funereal omens. The knocker, although they used it as gently as possible, seemed to send ghostly cavernous echoes through the house. An old woman who opened the door seemed a little surprised at seeing the girls; and when they asked for Mr. Hope, the sensitive conscience of Sydney Marion made her believe there was a look of startled propriety on the aged lady's face. She brought them into a large, gaunt, heavily-furnished dining-room, and left them to wait there.

‘I am afraid we ought not to have come,’ said Sydney, in a low awe-stricken voice. ‘I

don't think it looks right, Geraldine. I don't think that old woman looks pleased to see us.'

'My dear,' said Geraldine, 'I did not come to see that old woman, and I don't care whether she looks pleased or displeased. If I can't be of any use, I am sure Mr. Hope would rather I did not stay. Then I can go away. There is no harm done, don't you see, in any case.'

'But,' Sydney pleaded, 'two girls coming alone in this way to see a young man—do you really—now, really—think it is quite right? I know you get extraordinary ideas—girls in America; but in England, you know—this is England——'

'This certainly is England; there I entirely agree with you.'

'Well, don't you think it strange?'

'I don't think it strange,' said Geraldine, 'that girls should like to be of some help to somebody—even in England; and if it is

strange, the sooner we get over the strangeness the better. Anyhow, here we are, and we can't run away—at least, I don't mean to.'

The door opened, and Clement entered, looking very handsome for all his melancholy, and with a flush on his face caused by surprise and the excitement of seeing his unexpected visitors. He rushed up to them and clasped warmly a hand of each.

'Now, this is so good and kind of you! I wrote to Captain Marion, and I never expected that anybody else would come.'

'He would have come,' said Geraldine, 'but he had to leave town, and can't return perhaps for a day or two. We thought somebody ought to come, and so we came at once.'

This was heaping coals of fire upon the head of Sydney, this use of the word 'we;' thus taking her into the enterprise, and making her a full sharer in the evident credit it gave them in Clement Hope's eyes.

‘ Can we be of any use ? ’ Sydney said, taking courage.

‘ Oh, yes,’ Clement answered, with looks beaming with gratitude, ‘ you can. I am so lonely here. I don’t know what to do. My father never was ill before. I never saw anyone ill.’

‘ May we go and see him ? ’ Geraldine asked.

Sydney Marion felt that she could hardly stand erect while things were going on like this. In one moment they were being carried away to see a sick man in his very bedroom ! True, he was an old man ; but old or young—only think ! Two girls thus taken off to see him, before they had time to collect their thoughts, and taken off under the escort of a young man !

Geraldine was both helpful and skilful. She had not been in the sick man’s room a moment before she began altering its arrange-

ments. She opened a window here, drew down a curtain there, quietly displaced chairs, felt the old man's hot hands and his damp forehead, sprinkled the room with aromatic vinegar, and seemed to find something to do in every corner. Sydney stood by helpless, looking sympathetic and feeling so, but not having the least idea of anything she could do to help anyone.

Geraldine meanwhile was putting questions all the time to Clement, in a low tone, about his father's condition—when he had begun to grow ill; when his mind had begun to wander.

‘He would not have a doctor,’ Clement said; ‘he never would; the bare idea makes him angry.’

‘Still, I think you must have a doctor now,’ Geraldine said; ‘and you must have a nurse at once—a really helpful one, not some dreadful old Mrs. Gamp. I will go myself—Sydney and I will go and find out something

about a nurse. There is nothing we can do here just for the present, and we will come back again.'

In a moment they were out of the gate and on the main road, looking for a hansom cab.

'Do you know anything about nurses?' Sydney asked.

'Nothing at all; but we must get one.'

'Do you know where to go for one?'

'No, I don't think I do; but we can easily find out, can't we?'

'What an extraordinary girl you are!' Sydney said. 'You don't know London particularly well; you don't know anything about a nursing institution; you don't know where to go and find a nurse; and yet you say you will find one.'

'Of course,' said Geraldine composedly.

'But what will you do first?'

'Well, I think the best thing we can do is to go into a chemist's somewhere, and ask.

Perhaps he will show us a directory, or tell us something about a nursing institution, and then we can go there. It is all quite easy. What on earth is your difficulty?’

They found a nurse ; they found a doctor. The difficulties that Sydney dreaded began to disappear with marvellous rapidity. They went home and left a message for Mrs. Trescoe to say that they might possibly stay out all night. Sydney had by this time plunged so deeply into utter lawlessness and impropriety, that she had almost lost all consciousness of the conventionalities of maiden decorum, and would not have been surprised or shocked at any resolve Geraldine might announce. They went back to the sick man’s house. The doctor did not think there was much to be done more than to have Mr. Varlowe carefully watched and nursed. He shook his head over the case ; but took it with the practical composure of the physician, to whom all that sort

of thing is commonplace, and who regards the death of a patient as an event of no greater moment than his starting off on a railway journey. He persisted in regarding Geraldine as Clement's sister, and complimented her on being more composed than her brother. She explained the real state of facts to him ; but he did not pay any attention. He told her two or three stories of persons exactly like Mr. Varlowe in age, condition, and temperament, who, having previously enjoyed good health, were suddenly taken ill like him and died. But of course, he said, it did not necessarily follow that Mr. Varlowe was to die ; only it was as well to be prepared. He said he would call in the morning, and see how things were looking. Geraldine was glad when he went away.

Geraldine was standing in a room on the ground floor, which served as a library or study for Clement in ordinary times. She was look-

ing out upon the canal. It was the season of the year when there is hardly any night. The grey of twilight is succeeded imperceptibly by the grey of dawn; the one day hardly dead before the other begins to live. Her thoughts were going back to another house of death, in which, too, she had watched the dawn succeed the dusk, and tears came into her eyes. Clement entered the room, and she kept her face turned to the window, that he might not see her tears. The sound of wheels was heard, and a brougham stopped at the door.

‘Look, Miss Rowan,’ Clement said; ‘here is Mr. Montana. Is it not like him to come in this way? I might have known he would come; but I didn’t think of it. I never sent for him.’

Geraldine made no answer. A nameless fear went through her. She thought there was something unnatural, something unholy in Montana’s appearance at the death-bed of the old

man, whose death she felt sure was hastened by Montana's own words and acts. Whether Montana was true man or false, this was true all the same. Yet she could not help thinking that Montana must be right. It was surely impossible that he could voluntarily present himself at the death-bed of a father whom he had repudiated, and whose death, in all human probability, his cruelty and treachery had brought about. 'I must have wronged him,' she thought.

Montana came in, quiet, sweet, not surprised at anything; accepting Geraldine's presence there as if it were in the ordinary course of things.

'I called at Captain Marion's,' he explained, 'and Mrs. Trescoe kindly told me of what had happened. I thought perhaps I could be of some service, and I came on; I would have come long before this, only I did not know of it. Mrs. Trescoe only told me as I was leaving;

she probably thought I knew. Mr. Trescoe offered to come with me, but it was not necessary. We are quite enough.'

'You are very, very kind,' Clement said, 'but you must not stay too long.'

'I shall stay for the present,' Montana answered; 'I shan't leave you alone here, Clement.'

'Miss Rowan was so kind as to come——'

'It was just what I should have expected of Miss Rowan,' Montana said; and Geraldine was really pleased.

Geraldine felt that she could almost have admired Montana at that time. She began now to understand how it was that in moments of excitement, or even of danger, brave men could look to him, as she knew they had done, could ask for his guidance, and could trust to it. The moment he entered the place, he took, as it were, the command of everything. A sense of relief and security, of something almost like

happiness, settled upon the watchers in that melancholy house the moment he had come. It was as when the captain, suddenly aroused in the night of storm, takes charge of the vessel himself, or when a veteran general is hastily summoned to the leadership of a distressed army. Montana knew something—knew a good deal, indeed—of medicine and of surgery, and understood all that pertains to the hygiene of the sick chamber. He was quite easy and firm; had an eye for everything that needed to be done, and knew exactly what everyone of that little party best could do. To Geraldine he said once, dropping the words into her ear as he passed, ‘There is really nothing to be done that can be of much service. We can only smooth the way for him. The time is not far distant.’

Geraldine gave a little start. She had expected so much, and yet it was a shock to hear it.

‘Is it a question of days?’ she asked.

‘Of days at the most,’ he said. ‘Very likely a question of hours.’

Geraldine noticed that he spoke to Clement in a more reassuring way—not, indeed, holding out any hope, but still speaking with less suggestion of immediate danger.

‘Clement, my dear boy,’ he said in his kindest tone, ‘there is something I want you to do for me. It is not much use your being here just now, and it would do you good to move about a little. I have something at my lodgings which I think would be very soothing and refreshing for our poor old friend, and which I have often found to act with good effect in restoring consciousness to a wandering mind and failing nerves. It is a mixture that the Indians make out of various roots and barks of trees. You can easily find it. Go to my lodgings as quickly as you can—here is my latch-key—and in my bedroom, in the dressing-

case—this is the key of it—you will find this one bottle. I have a little stock of it, but I only keep just one bottle there for use. Bring it back. No one could find it so well as you except myself, and I really think I am likely to be of more use here than you are. When you come back, we can try it with our dear old friend, and I feel sure it will do him good.'

Geraldine was present when this was said. She looked surprised. It seemed strange that Mr. Montana should send Clement out of the way just then, but she assumed that it was done with the kindly purpose of distracting the young man's attention, and giving him something to do. He really was rather in the way than otherwise when he remained in the sick man's room, or near it. But she could not help thinking, 'Suppose Mr. Varlowe should die in the meantime?'

Clement went his way, however, without a word.

CHAPTER XXII

FATHER AND SON.

GERALDINE felt unutterably miserable and lonely when Clement left the house. She stood at the window looking after him. Montana spoke a word or two to her which she did not answer—which perhaps she did not even hear. Then he went quietly away to resume his place in the sick man's room. It seemed to Geraldine something unspeakably strange that Clement should be sent out of the house at such a time. She had an ominous conviction that something would happen while he was away. The house appeared not merely to have become more gloomy than ever because of his absence ;

but there was a certain sense of terror—nameless, but very real—diffused all around. So, at least, it seemed to Geraldine's overstrung nerves.

She remained brooding over disheartening fancies until it suddenly occurred to her that she had not come to that house to occupy herself in idle broodings, but to give some active help. She was going quietly back to the sick room when she met the nurse, who told her that Mr. Varlowe was sleeping pleasantly, and that she, the nurse, was going to make some tea; which, she observed, she thought would do the young ladies some good; thereby delicately implying that it was merely on the young ladies' account she thought of making it. Geraldine declined the tea just then, wondering meanwhile at the cool, practical, professional way of taking things which is so readily acquired by those who have to do with sickness and death as matters

of business. She went upstairs to the sick room. As she was near its door, Sydney came out for something, and, meeting Geraldine, told her that Mr. Montana was alone with the sick man ; and with scared face, Sydney added that she was afraid Mr. Varlowe would not live until Clement's return.

Geraldine hurried noiselessly into the room, feeling, in a vague kind of way, that somebody besides Montana ought to be present at the old man's last moments. She opened the door very quietly. The dawn was broadening through the windows. The lamp looked very pale. One of the blinds was drawn up, and she could see the trees and the waters of the canal in the growing light. The birds began to sing. She remembered always, afterwards, having heard them as she stood for one moment on the threshold.

Why she stood there and did not instantly go in, she did not know. She saw Montana

kneeling by the bedside. She saw that he had taken Mr. Varlowe's hand in his ; she was confident, somehow, from the old man's attitude, though she could not see his face, that he had returned for a moment to consciousness, in that lighting up before death of which poets as well as nurses tell us ; and if she was not dreaming, or if her senses were not racked by unusual tension beyond their sober trustworthiness, she heard Montana utter the word ' father.' Then she saw the poor father trying to rise in his bed, and extending his other hand over Montana's bowed head, as if in forgiveness and in blessing ; and she heard him murmur the words ' Edmund, Edmund, my son ! come back at last ! ' and then a sort of shiver seemed to go through him which shook the bed under him, and he fell back. Mr. Varlowe was dead. But there was still upon his face a smile of sweet satisfaction and comfort and peace. If Geraldine was not the victim of a mere phantasy,

Mr. Varlowe had died with a full conviction that his lost son had come back to him, and prayed for his forgiveness, and offered him love.

Geraldine surely did see and hear all this? She could not be mistaken. The light was streaming in, grey but clear, through the windows, and indeed the figure of Montana stood out in what seemed an almost unnatural distinctness. She was touched to the heart; she was disposed to forgive him all his past disloyalty to his father for this one act of penitence and submission. What true woman is not deeply moved by the penitence of a man? It was for this, then, that he had come—to make atonement and pray for pardon. For the first time since she had known him, Geraldine felt as if she could be in sympathy with Montana, could admire him, could believe in the possibility of his being true and great. She felt ashamed of having, even unconsciously, broken

in upon the sacred privacy of that most tender, touching scene of recognition. Yet she was glad that she had seen it, glad to know that Montana did not see her or anybody, and was simply acting on the impulse of that heart which, after all, it was now evident he must have. But she now felt as if she ought to steal softly out of the room, and not allow Montana to suspect that anyone had been present at that pathetic and tender scene. She was already drawing back, about to close the door behind her, and to leave the reconciled father and son alone. Tears were springing to her eyes, and indeed, if she could at that time have spoken to Montana alone and exactly as she felt, there is no knowing what gushing words of impulsive sympathy she might not have poured forth. But in a moment, as some scene changes in a theatre, as the evening clouds change, as the face of a pool gets broken and transfigured by the wind, the whole condition of things was

altered. Montana was now aware of her presence, and all the attitude of penitence, the words of affection, the touch of reconciliation, were over. She now saw Montana standing composedly erect beside the bed, in the attitude befitting some kindly sympathising stranger who knows that another sympathising stranger is in the room with him and has seen the last moments of a dying friend. One instant of time, one hardly appreciable instant, had made that change.

‘It is all over,’ Montana said, with the composure which was his characteristic; unmoved, but not unsympathetic. ‘He is released. It was a peaceful ending.’

‘Oh, why was not Clement here?’ Geraldine asked in awe-stricken whisper. ‘Why did you send him away?’

‘It was much better he should not be here,’ Montana answered. ‘He is spared a pain.’

‘Spared a pain! He will never forgive

himself. I should never forgive myself if I were he. He will never forgive you, if you sent him away purposely.'

'I did not send him away purposely; I had hopes that the poor old man might live a little longer; and if we could have got the mixture I sent for, I think it would have restored him to consciousness. But is it not better as it is?' They both spoke in the lowest whisper, afraid, it would seem, to disturb that sacred stillness. 'I have often seen that the soul struggling to be released from its prison of clay is kept back by the sight of some loved one's face. I have seen dying men suffer a moment of evident agony in this way. Believe me, it is much better as it is—much better that the poor old man should die with only you and me—strangers, kindly strangers—looking on.'

Then the nurse came in, and Sydney Marion and Geraldine left the room. Had she really fancied all that strange scene by the old

man's deathbed? Was Montana speaking but the truth when he talked of Mr. Varlowe dying in the presence of two kindly strangers? Surely she had seen what she thought she saw; surely she had heard the words whose echo she found still ringing in her ears. She had heard Montana call Mr. Varlowe 'father,' and had heard the old man's parting cry of joy and gratitude. And yet there was Montana, sympathetic indeed, but cool and composed as ever, giving reasons why it was better that no really loved one should be present to distract the old man's dying thoughts.

She hurried from the chamber of death out into the garden looking on the canal. Summer though it was, the dawn came up chilly, as it mostly does in these climes, and a cool wind blew upon Geraldine as she looked at the sky and the water and the grass, and felt only like one who dreams.

In a moment or two she heard a step

beside her, and Montana was there. 'Strange,' he said, 'that we should be so shocked at death. I am not so myself. I think that when we cease to have business in life, the best thing that could happen to us is to die. People talk of this thing or that being an object worth dying for. I don't think that is much praise to give to anything. Tell us that an object is worth living for : there you show its value.'

Geraldine was so bewildered by her doubts as to what she had seen or not seen, that the sense of mystery gave to Montana, in her eyes, an almost appalling interest. Was it conceivable of human nature that a man should thus arise from kneeling beside his father's deathbed, and coldly put his father's memory away from him, and repudiate and disclaim him, and seem in no wise troubled by doing all this, show none of the strain of conscious deceit? This was a psychological puzzle which Geraldine could not have explained, let her try her best. She

had not, indeed, given much thought at any time to the phenomena of imposture. Like most other persons, she thought of imposture as always deliberate and self-conscious. She did not know how often the impostor succeeds in at least half deceiving himself, how often he succeeds in wholly deceiving himself with regard to questions on which there is a possibility of doubt. Nor had she ever considered how vast, how illimitable is the capacity of certain human beings for persuading themselves into a belief of the actual truth of anything which they desire to have true. Not understanding all this, or thinking of it, she began to question some of her convictions about Montana, despite what she had seen in Mr. Varlowe's room. She began to wonder whether it was not possible that Montana, after all, might not be the old man's son, that the words he had spoken might have meant only something of a symbolical kindness, the watcher by the bed-

side taking for a moment the part of son to the dying man by virtue of the common relationship of all human beings. We do not say that Geraldine admitted this conclusion, but the thought flickered across her mind, and flickered with a special vividness at this particular moment while she stood and looked at Montana. In any case, be the solution what it might, he was becoming more and more a bewildering study to her. She felt a growing fascination in his look, in the power he was beginning to exert over her, and in her own bewildering conjectures about him. She was growing into a frame of mind with regard to him which was puzzling and alarming to herself. 'I must escape soon and somehow from all this,' she thought. 'I could not endure this much longer.'

It may be that in her excited condition she spoke these words, or some of them, aloud. It may be only that Montana guessed at what

thoughts were in her mind. He was fond of showing himself capable of reading the thoughts of people in this way ; he sometimes made a profound impression on his votaries by answering aloud to their unspoken questions.

‘ You are right,’ Montana said calmly ; ‘ you must leave this place. This old world is used up ; its associations soon grow oppressive to all free spirits. I must leave it soon too—I have work to do ; and you must join me in it.’

Geraldine turned, and looked appealingly at him.

‘ What do you want of me, Mr. Montana ? Why do you persecute me ? I have often told you what I feel. I do not trust you—I am afraid of you ; I was not at first—I am now.’

‘ I knew it, Geraldine ; I am glad of it. You begin to see what reality there is in me ; you will trust me some time. You may trust me ; I should never change to you.’

‘ You would sacrifice anything,’ she said

‘The damp of death is on everything round us here just now,’ Geraldine said with a chilly shudder. ‘Death is so near us ; there, only just behind those closed shutters. Do you think this is the time, Mr. Montana, or the place, to talk of ambitions and schemes, and loves and marryings?’

‘I do,’ Montana answered ; ‘the right time—the right place. Death reminds us that we too must die ; and we must see all the more reason for making use of the life we have.’

‘Clement is here,’ Geraldine suddenly said. She saw the young man coming up the road ; he looked pale and haggard in the ghastly dawn. She could have cried aloud with gladness and relief at his coming, even though she dreaded to meet him, now that he was too late. For the moment, it must be owned, she thought most of the escape that his coming allowed her to make.

‘I’ll not stay to speak to him,’ she said ; ‘I

dare not—I could not tell him that his father died, and he away—sent away.’

‘I’ll meet him,’ Montana said composedly ;
‘I hope to be able to show him that all has been for the best. But you need not stay, Geraldine ; you are tired ; we can speak of all this again.’

‘Never, never, if I can possibly help it,’ she said ; and she fled into the house. Miserable, lonely, phantom-haunted as it was, filled everywhere with the presence of death, it was a refuge and a shelter to her now.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GAMES OF CROSS-PURPOSES.

‘GIVE me a call to-day at half-past four ; I want to see you particularly ; be sure to come ; no puttings-off, mind.’

Such was the tenor of a little note Montana received from Lady Vanessa about noon of the day which had opened for him by the death-bed of his father. He was in little mood for the whims of a great lady. He would have evaded Vanessa’s peremptory invitation if he could. But there was a straightforward strength of purpose about Lady Vanessa which always impressed him, and he felt sure that if she sent for him it was really because she had

something to say which it would be well for him to hear. Besides, he began to think that it probably had something to do with the meeting between Geraldine and himself in Berkeley Square. It might be important for him to hear what the sprightly lady had to say on that subject. So he was punctual in his visit. Exactly at the appointed hour he was in Vanessa's drawing-room. Montana always prided himself on his punctuality. He had but one hero in his boyish, romantic days, and that was the Count of Monte Cristo; and the Count of Monte Cristo had an impressive way of always turning up at the exact moment, even if he had to come from the other end of the world. Half-unconsciously Montana was often playing the part of his boyhood's hero even still.

‘So, here you are!’ was Lady Vanessa’s gracious greeting. ‘I knew you would come; I want to talk to you.’

Lady Vanessa had just as much cruelty in

her disposition as is consistent with general good-nature ; that is to say, she felt kindly towards most persons, towards nearly all whom she knew, and she would have been glad, if it were put to her, to do a good turn for any man or woman. Nor would she under any circumstances have carried a freak of cruelty to the extent of inflicting serious pain. But within these limits she occasionally liked to be a little cruel, even to those for whom she had some regard. It gave her a pleasant sense of power when she was annoying people. She liked to sport with them, and make them seem ridiculous. Now, she had taken somewhat of a liking for Geraldine—‘the little American,’ as she called her—but she was none the less glad of the opportunity given to her to hurt the little American’s feelings slightly, and to sport with her.

‘What is the address of your little American?’ she asked Montana abruptly.

‘Do you mean Miss Rowan? She is not little, and she is not American.’

‘Oh, I call her little,’ said Lady Vanessa, conscious of her own superb height. ‘She is little to tall folks like you and me; and I call her American because she has been a long time in America, and picked up the ways of the people there.’

‘Another correction I would suggest,’ Montana quietly said. ‘You call her *my* little American, and she is not mine in any sense.’

‘But she is going to be, ain’t she? I suppose you don’t confabulate with girls in the public squares at midnight—girls like that, I mean—unless there is an engagement between you. I don’t see what better you could do, my good friend. She is a very pretty girl, and clever and good, I’m sure. But if I were you, I wouldn’t have meetings by moonlight alone with the girl I was going to marry. It won’t do her any good in people’s eyes. Now, I mean

to go and see her and give her a warning. She is as innocent as a goose of all our ways here, and it is only Christian charity to put her up to things. You know that I am nothing if not Christian and charitable.'

Montana was annoyed at the way in which Lady Vanessa spoke, but thought it hardly worth while to take it seriously, and make any objection ; and he was not perhaps in his heart sorry that she should go to Geraldine and tell her of the risk she ran by meeting him at night in the square. So he gave Lady Vanessa Geraldine's address, and Lady Vanessa straightway drove off to Captain Marion's house and asked to see Miss Rowan.

Geraldine was not much in the humour for visitors of any kind that day ; especially was she not in the mood to encounter fashionable ladies of Lady Vanessa's style. But she received the great lady, and tried to put on an air of composure and of friendly welcome.

‘Look here,’ Lady Vanessa began, coming to the heart of the question, ‘I have come to give you a piece of advice. You are a good girl, I am sure, and very clever, but you ain’t up to our ways. In England it would never do for a girl to go meeting a man at midnight in one of the squares, even though she is engaged to him, or going to be engaged to him.’

Geraldine was surprised and distressed by such a greeting. Her first feeling was one of resentment, and she gave expression to it.

‘I am much obliged to you, Lady Vanessa, for thinking of me at all, and coming to give me this warning, but I really don’t want it. I do understand English ways quite well, and I knew what I was doing, and what people would say if they came to know of it. I suppose people *will* come to know of it now, and I can’t help it. As far as I am concerned,

they may say what they like. I meant no harm, and thought no harm.'

'Of course you didn't,' Lady Vanessa said; 'and there is no harm done, child, anyhow. Nobody saw you but myself, as far as I know, and I shan't spread the story any farther. I could not help chaffing Montana a bit about it, because he sets up for such a saint, don't you know. But I really did not come to chaff *you*—only to give you a friendly hint. Nobody supposes you thought any harm; I am sure I don't. But still, don't do it again, there's a good girl.'

'I shan't have occasion to do it again. But if there were occasion I should not shrink from doing it again.'

'Oh, well, don't let there be occasion,' Lady Vanessa said. 'There need not be occasion, I should hope, for I don't advise you to make it a long engagement.'

'There is no engagement,' Geraldine said,

‘between Mr. Montana and me, long or short —there never will be.’

‘Come, now! that won’t do, you know. I have too high an opinion of you, Miss Rowan, to think that you are a girl to go spooning about with a man like Montana at night in a public square, unless you were going to marry him. I know he wants to marry you. He hasn’t told me so in so many words, but he allowed me to understand it; and there are lots of girls, let me tell you, would be only too glad to be in your place. So don’t talk about not being engaged to Mr. Montana—at least, to a sensible woman like me.’

‘But I am not engaged to Mr. Montana,’ said Geraldine firmly, ‘and I never shall be. If you care about knowing anything of my affairs, Lady Vanessa, you may as well know that at once—I shall never marry Mr. Montana, or be engaged to him.’

‘But he has asked you?’

‘I don’t think I ought to tell you anything about it,’ said Geraldine, ‘more than I have told you. I would not have told you that if I could have avoided it.’

‘Oh, bless you, I know it all,’ Lady Vanessa declared. ‘I know that he is wild about you, and I know that he has asked you to marry him, but I certainly did not know that you had made up your mind the other way. I can only say, I don’t understand you at all. I am sure you mean no harm, but let me tell you—a girl who refuses a man, and then goes about afterwards with him alone at night in a London square, will be apt to be considered an eccentric sort of young woman.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Geraldine. ‘I can’t help that.’

‘But look here—now, don’t be offended ; I mean this in all kindness—will you let me advise you? You are awfully proud, of course, and you think me very rude and intrusive.

Well, perhaps I am a little intrusive, but I only mean it for your good. I understand our London world, and you don't. Do, pray, like a good girl, if you don't mean to marry Mr. Montana, keep out of his way, and make him keep out of your way, and be resolute about it.'

Lady Vanessa now grew more and more interested in 'the little American,' and anxious about her.

Geraldine felt profoundly humiliated. She did not doubt the good intention of Lady Vanessa, whose frank smile indeed spoke only good nature, and she did not much mind Lady Vanessa's eccentric ways; but it was a bitter humiliation to her to know that even one woman thus regarded her with wonder, and felt bound to endeavour to intervene in her affairs. She did not know how far Lady Vanessa's promise of secrecy could be trusted, and anyhow it was a humbling thought that the promise of secrecy should be offered, and

should be held necessary. She felt that the chain which had been so strangely drawing itself around Montana and her was in its mysterious way bringing them closer and closer. She could only strengthen her courage by saying to herself, 'I must get away. I must escape from all this, and go back to America.' She said as much aloud.

'I am going back to America very soon, Lady Vanessa ; my mother is in America.'

'Then, the sooner you go back to your mother the better, my dear girl, if you really don't think of marrying Mr. Montana. But I should think that over, if I were you. He is a splendid fellow in many ways. You might do worse.'

Geraldine shook her head.

'No? Well, then, go back to America. Let me tell you, I don't think you'll find it such a very easy thing to get rid of Mr. Montana if you stay here much longer. He's a man to

have his way in most things. That's one reason why I like him. I like a man, or a woman either, who says, "Now, I want this or that, and I'm going to have it." That's the sort of man *he* is, don't you know. In many ways I think he's a good deal of a humbug—between ourselves, and since you say you don't intend to marry him. I've often said almost as much to himself. Well, good-bye, Miss Rowan; and I hope you'll forgive my intrusiveness. I'm awfully wilful; but I generally mean well. On the whole, I think I'm glad you don't take to Montana; but all the same I am not by any means sure that you are free of him. I should think he'll manage to have his way in the end.'

Lady Vanessa went away, leaving Geraldine much disturbed and distressed. What especially troubled her was the consciousness that in her secret soul she had misgivings now and then that corresponded with Lady Vanessa's doubts

as to the possibility of her maintaining her will against Montana.

‘Oh, why am I not madly in love with somebody!’ the girl said, half seriously, half in that kind of miserable jesting mood in which men and women with a certain poetic dash in them are wont to laugh at their own weaknesses and perplexities. ‘If I were only in love with someone, I should be safe. Why am I not in love with——’ and then she stopped and got very red, and felt as if she had been going to say something shameful. What she was going to say was this, ‘Why am I not in love with Clement Hope?’

‘Poor boy!’ she thought. ‘Melissa is trouble enough for him.’

She was almost sorry that Lady Vanessa had gone. It was a relief to have anyone to speak to on the subject that engrossed her. To her unspeakable delight, a day or two after, Captain Marion returned suddenly to town.

He came back, he said, to look after poor Clement Hope. In truth, that was only one reason for his sudden return. He did not care to take part in the inquiry his friends were making in the North. It was far too like the work of a private detective, he thought ; and he said this as well as thought it. In vain Aquitaine and Fanshawe endeavoured to impress him with a sense of the imperative duty that they believed was imposed on them to settle the question of Montana's identity. Marion could only say that he detested such work ; that he believed in his friend Montana, and scorned to make any inquiry about him. His mind was misgiving him, all the same. He would not admit it even to himself ; but one source of his annoyance was this growing doubt which he would not acknowledge and could not wholly shake off.

His coming determined Geraldine. She would speak to him at once. She must have

some friend and protector, and he was *best* of all. She was fond of him and trusted him ; she knew he was fond of her and trusted her. There was no woman on this side of the Atlantic to whom she could possibly have opened her mind.

No sooner resolved than done. She invaded Captain Marion in his study, She had never made quite so free as this before.

Marion welcomed her, but seemed embarrassed too.

‘I want to speak to you, Captain Marion,’ Geraldine began, almost breathless. ‘You have always been so good and kind to me, that I think I ought to tell you of something that troubles me.’

‘There ! I knew it,’ Marion thought. ‘The girl’s been made miserable by these ridiculous reports ! She thinks she ought not to stay here any longer.’

‘Well, Geraldine,’ he said, ‘I have tried to

be kind to you, but it was a selfish feeling, I am afraid ;' and then he stopped, and thought to himself, ' Oh, hang it all ! that will never do. That seems like making a declaration of love to the girl, and justifying all these fools say.' ' Selfish, you know,' he said, with an effort to be very resolute and calm, ' because it was so pleasant for my girls to have a companion like you.'

' I want to speak to you,' she said again, ' of something that troubles me.'

' Well, well, my dear !' Marion said. ' Geraldine—I mean, Miss Rowan——'

' Miss Rowan ?' she asked, with open eyes of wonder. ' Why Miss Rowan ? You are not offended with me ?'

' Oh, good heavens, no !' and there was unmistakable earnestness in Marion's tone this time. ' How could I be offended with you, my dear girl—I mean Geraldine ?'

' Then why did you call me " Miss Rowan " ?'

‘Well, if it comes to that,’ said Marion, more embarrassed than ever, ‘you are Miss Rowan, you know.’

‘I am not generally Miss Rowan to you.’

‘Well, I will call you anything you like,’ he said, ‘and I will do anything you like, for you know how fond I am of you. I mean—that is—of course, you know what I mean is—that you know what a high regard I have for you.’

‘There is something strange in your manner,’ Geraldine said, looking up at him with open wondering eyes. ‘You don’t seem like yourself. I almost think I ought not to come troubling you about this trouble of mine.’

‘No, no ; there is nothing wrong with me,’ Marion said, ‘and nothing wrong with you, I am sure.’ ‘What am I saying?’ he mentally interjected. ‘But I don’t know, Geraldine, that there is much good in talking about this. It is all folly and nonsense. Let them say what they like. They can’t compel you.’

‘Can’t compel me to do what?’

‘Well, I am sorry to put it so bluntly,’ said Marion. ‘They cannot compel you to marry, if you don’t like.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Geraldine, ‘that is quite true. I tell myself that again and again, and yet I am so troubled, somehow. But how did you manage to guess beforehand what I was going to talk to you about? I did not think anyone here had thought of it but myself.’

‘Yes; I have thought about it,’ said Marion, ‘because I have heard foolish talk about it.’

‘Then it has been talked about?’

‘Talked about! Oh, yes, my dear girl; everything is talked about now. It has been talked of to me, and I make no doubt it has been talked of to others. But I do assure you, Geraldine, in all sincerity and truth, I never said or thought anything which could give the slightest encouragement to talk like that.’

‘No,’ said Geraldine, dreamily, ‘I never supposed you did. Why should anyone suppose you did?’

‘People suppose all sorts of things,’ Marion said fretfully. ‘People seem to think that a man can’t be kind to a woman without trying to make her fall in love with him and marry him. They seem to forget that there is such a thing as difference of age.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Geraldine, ‘I am afraid, Captain Marion, you lay too much stress upon that. I don’t think you quite see all the difficulty that troubles me. The difference of age would not be much of an obstacle.’

‘Not much of an obstacle!’ Marion thought. ‘Where are we now? What does the girl mean?’ A sudden thought flashed across him. ‘Is there such a very great difference? She is a charming girl, and—oh, but that’s nonsense!’

‘Well,’ he said aloud, ‘difference of age

means a difference that increases, and not diminishes, every day.'

'Then you are entirely on my side?'

'Entirely on your side? I am always on your side. But I don't think I quite understand. It is all in your own hands, Geraldine. No pressure whatever can be brought to bear upon you.'

'But that is what I am afraid of,' said Geraldine. 'There is a kind of strange mysterious pressure that I cannot understand or explain which is put on me, and I sometimes begin to be afraid that it will break down my will and all my power of resistance.'

Marion was now utterly puzzled. What did she mean? Was she ascribing to him some power of unconscious fascination which he was not even trying to exert, but which threatened to prove too strong for her will?

'That's why I come to you,' she said; 'I want shelter, and strength, and protection.'

‘But, Geraldine, I really don’t quite understand. Is not this only giving a countenance to what people say? Why come to me for shelter and protection—shelter and protection against what?’

‘Against myself, sometimes, I am afraid—against my own want of firmness.’

‘Surely you do not want firmness! Why, you seem to me to be a girl of the strongest character and the clearest purpose. You ought to know your own mind if any woman does. Do you know your own mind in this? Do you really know what you want to do and what you do not want to do?’

‘I know what I wish to do,’ Geraldine said plaintively; ‘I know that well enough. I know what I hate and dread to do. I am afraid I cannot make anyone understand what my trouble is. I must seem a silly and stupid girl to you when I tell you in one breath that I am afraid of being brought to do the very

thing I should most hate to do. I know that my life is entirely in my own keeping, and that no one can compel me—but still I come to you, and I must open my heart to you—I have no one else here—and tell you that I am weak and cowardly enough sometimes to fear that I may be persuaded to give way. So I want you to support me and defend me.'

Marion now began to find that they were really at cross-purposes, and that things were not as he was supposing them to be.

'I think, Geraldine,' he said, 'we had better have a little very plain speaking, and put what we mean into precise words. What do you want me to do? What is the danger you want me to protect you against?'

Geraldine stopped for a moment. She was disappointed. Either Marion really did not know her trouble, or he would not relieve her from the pain of explaining it in words. It had been a great relief to her for the moment,

like the idea of even Montana offering himself as a husband to Geraldine while any manner of suspicion or doubt about him and his purposes remained on anyone's mind. And then—and then—she was a charming girl, and Marion was very fond of her, and people had talked as if it were possible that she might marry him ; and although Marion did not want her to do so, yet for the moment there was in his heart a sort of revolt at the thought of her marrying anyone else.

‘ And you have answered No ? ’ he said at last, stopping in his walk, but not looking at her.

‘ I have answered No ; and I mean No. ’

‘ Very well ; then I suppose there is an end of it, isn't there ? ’ There was something strangely fretful in his tone.

At that moment a letter was put into Geraldine's hand. It was in Montana's handwriting. She looked up at Marion with such an expres-

sion in her face that she might as well have told him at once the letter was from Montana. He could not but know it. 'From Montana?' he said.

'It is. I don't know what he is writing to me about.'

'Hadn't you better open it and see?'

Geraldine read the letter aloud, not without some trepidation. It was very short. It only begged her to come to him at once. 'There is good reason,' Montana wrote. 'Even you, when you come, will see that I was right in sending for you.'

'What absurd mystery is this?' Marion asked. 'What is coming over everybody? We are all going in for mysteries and mysterious inquiries, all over the place. Not one of us is a bit like what he was or she was two months ago. You can't go to him, Geraldine.'

'Oh, no,' she said at once. 'I don't know what he can want of me. I can't go; it's out

of the question.' Then suddenly remembering Melissa and her unlucky correspondence, she stopped in embarrassment, and with a growing colour on her cheek, she said, 'Yes, Captain Marion, I must go to him. I can't help it.'

'Another mystery!' he said. 'You say you won't marry Montana, and that you don't like him; and yet he has only to send for you, and you run to him! He has only to whistle, and you fly to him. Geraldine, you shan't go.'

'I must go, indeed,' she pleaded. 'It is something I am sure that does not concern me, but it does concern someone else. I must go, Captain Marion.'

'Let me go; I will talk to Montana. He is a man, and has some sense.'

'Come, you are turning cynical now,' Geraldine said, with an effort to be pleasant, 'and you must have your fling against women too. You say we are changed, Captain Marion. Is not this something of a change in you?'

‘Well, I dare say it is. I suppose some wrong twist is getting into my mind as well as into the minds of all the rest of you. Anyhow, let me go and talk to him, Geraldine.’

‘I can’t, indeed. I must go. Pray be kind to me, and don’t ask me anything. It is all right—at least, it is not all right, and it might be all wrong, but I don’t want it to be so; and I want to go and see him, and I must go at once.’

‘Then I will go with you.’

‘Yes, come with me by all means,’ Geraldine said, very glad of his presence and protection; ‘come with me, and wait for me. I shall be obliged to speak to Mr. Montana alone, but you can come and wait for me, and you can cut the interview short when you think it has lasted long enough. I shall be very glad to have you with me. Only, come; we must not lose time.’

CHAPTER XXIV.

‘ SHE’S LEFT HER HOME, THE GRACELESS GIRL.’

AN hour or so before this talk between Geraldine and Marion, a panting, alarmed little fugitive was getting out of a train at Euston Square. The train was crowded, and there was a great deal of bustle at the station. The fugitive was able to escape unnoticed. Had there been less crowd and less confusion, less struggling for luggage, and hustling of porters, and clamour of cabmen, somebody must have observed that the fugitive was a fugitive, and was in much alarm and distress.

Melissa Aquitaine, when she got out of the train looked so wildly about her, and then drew herself together with such an elaborate and

determined appearance of absolute composure and utter indifference, that anybody who had time to observe her must have seen her confusion. She put aside intrusive porters who would ask her about her luggage. She told one such officious inquirer that she had no luggage ; she asked another what it mattered to him ; to a third she gave no reply but an angry glance. She ran the wrong way up the platform, and found that she was apparently making for the place whence she had started. She then turned round affrighted and ran the other way, and passed the door of exit in her alarm, and got bewildered amongst the booking offices, and telegraph offices, and refreshment rooms, and hideous men and odious barmaids. Then when she was actually in the open street it occurred to her that she had not the least idea how to get to the place she wished to reach. She turned back and hailed a hansom cab, then changed her mind and got

into a heavy four-wheeler, paying no attention to the importunate demand of the driver of the hansom to be compensated for breach of contract. She told the driver of her four-wheeler to get on as quickly as he could, without telling him where he was to go. He saw clearly enough that something was wrong, and so drove her a little way from the station before he stopped to ask her any question. He came down from his box and put his head in at the window, convinced that it was a case for quiet and confidence. Her manner fully confirmed his idea, for she whispered the direction to him in as low a tone as though there had been anybody near to hear it or care about it. She named the street where Montana lived. She was going in this affrighted way to see Mr. Montana. She had come from her home for the purpose. She had, in plain words, run away.

During the last day or two she had heard

talk of some vague kind between her father and Mr. Fanshawe about Montana. She knew that they thought they had found out, or were on the track of finding out, something to his disadvantage. She lay awake at night thinking of what she should do. She thought of writing to him, and began a letter and then stopped. She could not explain to him in a letter all her grounds for alarm.

Then, a letter might not reach him. She could not remember the number of the house in which he lived, although she could have found the house easily enough if she were there. Why, then, could she not go there? In this long, wakeful, miserable night, that thought came more and more into her mind, 'Why not go and tell him?' If she could see him in time, and put him on his guard—what a service that would be to offer him! Perhaps he would be grateful, perhaps he would understand what risks she had run,

and how much she had sacrificed for him. Perhaps, out of being grateful to her, he might come to care for her. At all events, he could not but speak kindly to her and pity her. She rose from her bed half a dozen times at night, and walked up and down her great lavishly-ornamented Moorish-Turkish-Japanese room, in whose decorations she had once taken such pride and pleasure, and about which now she cared so little. She walked up and down, looking like a perturbed and restless little ghost. She looked out of the window at the growing dawn, and tried to keep her composure, and to think over things, and to make up her mind. When the full morning came at last, and the household was stirring, she listened for every word of conversation among the men that might give her some hint of the danger which threatened Montana. Frank Trescoe, she found, had suddenly come down from London—what did that mean? She did not hear

much, but still there were words let drop now and then, and there was sullen resolve enough in Frank Trescoe's tones, to make her feel convinced that there was a danger, and that they were all set on doing some injury to Montana. It never occurred to her to think of anybody else being in the right, and Montana being in the wrong. Trescoe and Fanshawe she regarded as mere conspirators against a good and great man; vile, malignant, evil-minded conspirators, who, out of their sheer wickedness, were bent on injuring him because of his mere goodness. Her father she regarded as one meant for better things, but drawn into a base conspiracy through the delusive arts of unscrupulous acquaintances. The more she thought, the more she raged against the conspirators, the more she became determined that it was her destiny and her duty to baffle the conspiracy and to save the noble victim.

A plan soon shaped itself in her mind.

That day Mrs. Aquitaine had promised to take her to an art gallery in the town, to meet some girls, cousins of Melissa's, there. Melissa knew well what that would come to. Mrs. Aquitaine would be sure, when the moment came, to say she could not go. She would not quit her beloved sofa. Then Melissa would pout at the disappointment, and the easy mamma would allow her to go alone in the carriage. Once she was free of the house, anything might be done. She turned the whole matter over in her throbbing little brain, and she began to think that the stars in their courses were fighting on her side. She would be expected to pass many hours in the art gallery, looking at the pictures with her cousins, who passed for having ideas about art. It was now twelve o'clock. She would not be expected home before six o'clock at the earliest. Even if she were missed after that, half an hour or an hour, at least, would be allowed to pass before her absence would

cause any alarm. She was observant enough of anything that interested her at the moment, and she had been quite enough interested in the going up to London and the coming back from it to bear in her mind the length of time the journey took, and the hour at which the train left from either end. She remembered that there was a train about one o'clock for London. If she went by that train she also knew that she would be in London actually before her absence could create any alarm at home. She would be in London, and she would have accomplished her purpose. She would be able to warn Montana even before a letter could do it. She would have won some claim to his regard. She would have shown him that she was really devoted to him. It was as wild a scheme as ever entered the mind of a foolish, lovelorn, impassioned girl. Perhaps, considering the difference of time and place and all conditions, it was as least as wild

as that of Juliet herself. But Melissa was now as devoted as any Juliet. There was scarcely any risk she would not have run, any folly she would not have committed, now that the fit was on her.

All that was known of her that day at home was that she went with her maid in the carriage to the art gallery, where she was to meet her cousins. She dismissed the maid and the carriage, and gave directions that they were to call for her at half-past six in the evening. She entered the gallery, went once rapidly round the first room, came down the stairs again, and passed out. The man at the door of the gallery noticed her sudden departure, and thought she had gone to call back the carriage, or give some message, or look for something she had forgotten. He paid no great attention to the matter ; only, he did remember afterwards that he had seen the young lady come in and very soon after go out again.

Melissa was gone, and had her five or six hours' law all to herself. She got into a cab and drove to the station. She was still some half an hour too early when she had bought her ticket, her hands trembling all the time with nervous excitement so that she could hardly take up her change, the money rattling about in a piteous and confusing way. Then she left her ticket behind her, and had to be called after and reminded of it. When all this was done she sat in miserable anxiety in the waiting-room, dreading lest at any moment some chance acquaintance should come in, or that her father, put in some strange way on the scent of her departure, should suddenly present himself at the door. The time seemed as if it never would pass. A kindly porter took pity on her, thinking that she was some poor girl who had to leave her home, perhaps to go to a strange town as governess or something of the kind, and wondering very much why it was

that no friend could be found to come with her and see her off. He took her, therefore, under his charge, at first much to her alarm. When the train was ready he found a carriage for her, and saw her safely into it. She pulled out her purse, and, to his surprise, gave him a whole handful of silver, some of the shillings in her agitation falling on the platform. In a few minutes the train was gone, and Melissa's flight was safely made.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Montana got rid of the last of the visitors at his evening reception. He was weary, and full of ominous, uncomfortable feeling. His nerves, always highly strung, seemed now like musical instruments that vibrated to some unseen extraneous influence. Suddenly he was told that a lady wished particularly to speak with him for a few moments. This was vexatious. He was not in a mood to care for the spiritual confidence of any perplexed soul, and he assumed it was on some

such business the lady was coming. His own soul was perplexed enough to occupy all his attention. He said he could not see anyone ; but a pressing message came back, saying that the lady must see him—begged him to see her. He gave way at last, wearily. To do him justice, he was not ill-natured at heart, and seldom denied any petition, no matter what inconvenience it brought to himself. He rather submitted to the lady's coming in than gave her permission to come ; and he was determined to make her visit as short as possible, and to prevail on her to tell her story in the fewest words.

It was growing dusk, the evenings falling in now early, as the summer was waning ; and Montana, his mind quite abstracted from all around him, did not recognise at first the little figure that stood upon his threshold.

Panting, palpitating with excitement, with fear and hope and anxiety of all kinds, the 'girl

said, 'Mr. Montana, don't you know me? I am Melissa Aquitaine.'

'Miss Aquitaine!' Montana said, greatly surprised, his mind suddenly coming back to the mysterious letters of which he had received so many. 'I am very glad to see you; I didn't know you were in town. Why are you alone? Where is your father?'

'My father is at home,' she said; 'and that is why I have come here. I have come to tell you something, Mr. Montana—to warn you about something. I don't know what it is, but they have found out something, or they think they have, that concerns you; and it is something bad, they say; and I believe there is danger about it, or they are going to do something—I don't know what—but I could hear enough to know that there was danger for you, or something unpleasant for you, and I thought I would come and tell you of it.'

'When did you leave home?'

‘Only to-day. I came by the train; at one o’clock, I think, I came away as soon as ever I could. I would have come any length to save you.’

‘But,’ Montana said, ‘my dear young lady, I don’t know what danger could threaten me, or how any warning could avert it.’

His mind misgave him, nevertheless. He was in a mood to anticipate danger. But he was not now, and never was, in a mood to show this.

‘No one has anything to say against me, Miss Aquitaine. If I have enemies, they are enemies on public grounds, and I have no reason to dread them. Most certainly your father is not one of them.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Melissa. ‘I almost think he is now. Not that he would do anything unfair, of course; but he has something on his mind. They think they have made some discovery about you.’

‘Who are “they”?’ said Montana. ‘Your father—and who else?’

‘My father, and young Fanshawe, and Frank Trescoe, and others too, I think. They have been rummaging out evidence amongst all sorts of people where we live, you know, and they think they have found out something.’

‘Do they know of your coming up to town?’ he asked.

‘Oh no,’ said Melissa; ‘they would never have allowed me if they knew. But I was determined to risk everything in order to warn you. I didn’t care about the risk. I ran away, Mr. Montana, and that’s the truth of it. I ran away from my home, and I don’t care. I am not ashamed, or, if I am ashamed, I am not sorry.’

‘I don’t know how to thank you,’ Montana said; and, indeed, he was for the moment surprised and touched by the reckless generosity of the girl. ‘I don’t know why you should

do so much for me; or how I can show my gratitude.'

'You don't owe me any gratitude,' Melissa answered in piteous voice, and with eyes fixed on the ground. 'I couldn't help it, Mr. Montana. I would die for you, if that would do any good. I should like to die for you, if you would only speak a kind word or two to me. Oh, I am so wretched sometimes—and now you know everything, and you despise me.' She put her hands over her eyes and burst into tears. She had now completely broken down; the tension of excitement was relaxed; the physical and mental reaction had set in.

Montana was really moved. What man, after all, could ever be absolutely indifferent to such evidence of a pretty girl's devotion and love? She looked very charming, with her little child-like head bent over her hands, and her breast trembling and palpitating like that

can come right again for me, and I don't much care now.'

She seemed to have grown into a strange maturity of thought and speech within a few moments. She spoke with an almost icy composure. She had all the quiet indomitable courage of despair. She asked nothing now of fate.

Montana grew alarmed. There was no mistaking Melissa's earnestness of purpose. A woman who spoke like that was capable of any resolve. He tried to reason with her, but she put his reasoning quietly aside. Nothing on earth could move her, she said. She would never go back to her home.

'We can do so little for you here,' he said. 'I have not even a woman servant, Melissa.'

Melissa's eyes lit up for a moment as she heard him call her by her name—for the first time. He saw it, and stopped short. Then she smiled a wild smile.

‘You don’t know what to do with me? I am terribly in the way. But I don’t mean to put you to any trouble, Mr. Montana; I am going at once.’

‘My dear Miss Aquitaine, going where?’ This time it was ‘Miss Aquitaine.’

‘I don’t know—anywhere out of this. I have done all I wanted to do, Mr. Montana—fulfilled my mission, I dare say some of you would call it.’ There was a ring of her old petulance in her voice as she said these words. ‘I think there is some plotting going on against you, and I have come to tell you of it, to put you on your guard; and that’s about the best mission I could have; and so, don’t mind about me—I’m all right. Good-evening, Mr. Montana.’ She got up and held out her hand.

‘You can’t go out of this,’ Montana said, ‘until I have put you in the care of some relatives or friends who have a higher claim on

you than I have. For the present, you must stay here. I am old enough to be your father—almost; no one will say a word because you have spent a few hours in my house. I owe you too deep a debt of gratitude not to take good care of you—and we are not so ungracious here as to allow young ladies to go wandering about. Come! can you make tea?’

She shook her head.

‘I don’t think I can; I can’t do anything. You put some tea into something, and then you get hot water: but I don’t know; I don’t think I could do it.’

‘Come, then, I can do it; and I’ll show you how. I have learned to do all sorts of cookery for myself in my odd life of wandering. I want some tea, and I know you do too. Now, then, you shall look on, and I’ll give you a lesson in the art of making tea.’

Montana was talking with a purpose—with two purposes. He wanted to turn the girl’s

mind away from the seriousness of the situation; to try to get her to think of it as something unimportant, not at all irretrievable. Also, he wanted to gain time. Nothing could have been wiser on his part. Melissa's high-strung despairing mood became a little relaxed and softened as he spoke thus in quiet cheerful tone. He felt that he was gaining ground. He rang the bell; he bade his servant get tea-cups; kept the servant in and out of the room; talked all the time to Melissa, and drew her out, and compelled her to talk commonplaces in answer to his commonplaces; left the room three or four times and instantly came back again—thus relieving Melissa from any idea that he was keeping guard upon her—and in one of these short intervals he wrote to Geraldine Rowan and begged of her to come to him at once. He felt much satisfaction with what he had done. In all his concern for poor Melissa, he was glad to make of her a means to bring

Geraldine Rowan to him. She must come, he thought, and her coming would be a new bond to connect her name with his. He passed some moments of keen excitement, for all his cool and cheerful manner. At last his servant came in and said :

‘ Miss Rowan, sir.’

‘ Show Miss Rowan in.’ He rose with a feeling of triumph.

Melissa’s eyes flashed fire. In an instant two things seemed to be made clear to her. She was captured, and Montana was Geraldine’s accepted lover. She felt like a little panther caught in a trap. Was there ever, she thought, any girl so disappointed, so degraded before? Ah, it was too cruel of Montana, of Geraldine, of Heaven ! All the heroic and romantic glow of her enterprise had quite gone out of it now. She was not a heroine ; she was treated only like some naughty school-girl who has played the truant. She was merely kept in durance until

some severe friend could be sent for to take her back to home and angry parents and punishment. Geraldine Rowan was to be brought to see her disgrace and take charge of her; and Geraldine would pity her and be kind to her, and would talk about her to Montana when she had gone, and would learn from him all that she had said in the wildness of her mad love; and the two would shake their heads over her; and Geraldine, for all her good nature, would condemn her as a very unwomanly and shocking girl. Even death would hardly save her now from being an object of ridicule. Yet, if there were any chance of death at that moment, oh, how gladly would our poor little outlaw have grasped at it! What a wild satisfaction it would have given her if she could have said to herself, 'When Geraldine comes, she will only see me dead.'

'You sent for Geraldine Rowan!' she ex-

claimed, turning upon him with eyes that flamed.

‘I did,’ he said. ‘She is the best person to help us; she is very fond of you.’

‘Oh!’ was all Melissa’s answer; a low cry of pain and shame.

CHAPTER XXV.

RECAPTURED, NOT RECOVERED.

THE room was dim and dusk, and Geraldine, with her short sight, had to look closely to see who was there.

She did not recognise Melissa at first. Montana came forward. 'Miss Aquitaine is here,' he said, 'and I am sure she would be glad to speak to you, Geraldine. That is why I sent for you so unceremoniously, and I knew you would come. I shall leave you two together for a few moments, and Miss Aquitaine will tell you why she came to town, and you will advise her.'

He had purposely called her Geraldine

before Melissa, and had spoken with the manner of one who has authority. He felt certain that Geraldine in her surprise at that moment would not stop to repudiate any authority he might seem to assume, and that it would be a distinct advantage to his purpose that Melissa should see his manner to Geraldine, and Geraldine's acceptance of it.

When he went out of the room poor Melissa sat in a great arm-chair, leaning her chin upon her hand, and looking utterly haggard and crushed. She did not turn her eyes towards Geraldine, but kept them sullenly fixed on the floor.

At the first moment Geraldine was really not much surprised to see Melissa there. She had not had time to take in any of the meaning of the situation, and for a moment or two it did not seem to her more strange that Melissa should be in that house than if she had met her in Captain Marion's home. Now, however,

looking at Melissa's crushed and desponding attitude, something like the truth came in upon her.

'When did you come to London?' she asked; 'and why did you come here?'

'You needn't ask me any questions,' Melissa said coldly; 'you needn't ask why I came here. Guess for yourself; and if you can't guess, Mr. Montana will tell you. I suppose you are very angry with me, Geraldine, but that was to be expected, and I don't care. I don't care who is angry with me now. *Cela m'est égal*, as someone says in some play.'

'Is your father in town?'

'He is not in town. If he were, I dare say I should not be here. You ought to feel grateful to me, Geraldine, although I'm sure you don't feel anything of the kind. I ran a risk to put Mr. Montana on his guard against people who are plotting and planning to injure him. That is more than you would have done, I dare

say, although he is in love with you, and you are going to marry him.'

'Dear Melissa,' said Geraldine, 'don't talk in that way. It is painful to hear you. Mr. Montana is not in love with me.'

'Oh!' Melissa exclaimed, with a little start; 'how can you?'

'No, I don't believe it,' Geraldine answered, with some passion in her voice. 'I don't call that love—I don't call—— Well, at all events, I am not in love with him, and I am not going to marry him. I am never going to marry him. I am not going to marry anyone, him least of all in the world. I am so sorry for you, Melissa. I feel so deeply for you. I wish with all my heart that I could help you in any way, but this is really dreadful. You surely did not leave your home, and your family, and your dear, kind, loving father, and rush up to London in this mad way?'

'Oh, but I did, though. That is exactly

what I did do. I am not sorry for it, even still; although I know now, if I didn't know before, how little good it was for me to make any sacrifice. But I was not thinking about myself when I did it, and I am not thinking much about myself now. It is done, and can't be helped.'

Geraldine threw her arms round the trembling little girl, and kissed her tenderly again and again.

'You sweet, foolish, dreadful child!' she said; 'you were not thinking of yourself, I know. It was wild of you to do it, and you ought never to have done it. But it was generous, and I can't be very angry with you.'

Melissa struggled a little to get away. She was one of those who, however touched or tender at heart, are always inclined to rebel against any demonstration of tenderness or affection.

‘Well, that’s very good of you, Geraldine, I’m sure,’ she said. ‘I was afraid you would have been jealous, my dear, although you need not. There is not the slightest occasion for your being jealous about me, as you can see perfectly well.’ She could not keep her tongue from petulance, even at that moment. ‘But it is very kind of you, Geraldine, for all that, and what they call magnanimous; and I am sure you are sorry for me, more sorry than I am myself just at this moment. But it is all up with your silly friend, my dear, and I shall have to pass a life of penitence and scolding if I live at all, which I hope I shan’t, and which I will not do if I can help it. Good-night, Geraldine; it is most improper of me to be here in a strange gentleman’s apartments, isn’t it? And it is not every strange gentleman’s *fiancée* who would be quite so good-natured as you have been. Anyhow, it is time now for me to depart, as the heroines of the novels

would say—or to take myself off, as I prefer to put it. Good-night.’

‘Where on earth are you going?’

‘I am going,’ said Melissa, ‘to the Salvanners—in America, where the war is. That is Dickens, Geraldine—one of the few things I remember in Dickens—and I like it, although I don’t quite know what it means. I am going there—it has a charming vagueness about it, and falls in nicely with my present state of mind.’

‘You are going home, I suppose?’

‘I don’t exactly know what “home” is,’ said Melissa. ‘I am quite sure I am not going home to my father’s house, like the prodigal young person in the Bible story. I should have a very chilly reception there, I rather think.’

‘Then, you are coming home with me; you are coming to Captain Marion’s. That is your home in London.’

‘I shan’t do anything of the kind,’ Melissa said, getting up and rapidly tying her bonnet and adjusting her mantle. ‘Good-evening, Geraldine.’

‘You are certainly not going out of this alone,’ said Geraldine. ‘My dear little Melissa, if I had to hold you by main force, I would take care of that. I fancy I am a good deal stronger than you. I almost think I could carry you from this to Captain Marion’s in my arms, and I will do it too, rather than allow you to go anywhere by yourself to-night. But it doesn’t need all that. Captain Marion is here. I brought him with me, and he will take care of you. He is as kind as any father could be, although I am sure your father is kind enough. Mr. Aquitaine will come up to-morrow, and everything will be right.’

‘Ridiculous!’ Melissa replied sharply; ‘nothing on earth will ever be right with me again. I had much better be dead. Every-

body will be ashamed of me, and scold me, and preach at me ; and I shall be a byword and a reproach.'

Montana was not glad when, after leaving the two girls together he was told that Captain Marion was in the house, had come with Miss Rowan, and wished to see him. Montana could hardly ever be described as disconcerted, but he was a little displeased at the news. He was not anxious to see Marion just then. He was not pleased to hear that Marion had come with Geraldine. Much of the dramatic effect of Geraldine's prompt answer to his summons would be taken away by her having come under the escort of Captain Marion. Then, again, he did not know whether Marion's return to town so suddenly might not have something ominous in it. All the time while he was reasoning with Melissa, and humouring her, and keeping up an appearance of the utmost calmness, his mind was far from being

composed. No shadow on his face allowed the girl to suppose for a moment that there was anything to alarm him in the news she brought from the North. But he felt all the time that there probably was something in it. Of late he had begun to be conscious more or less vaguely that Trescoe disliked him. We have said already that Montana was not habitually an observant man, for the reason that he did not take sufficient interest in people in general to be observant of what they did or how they looked. But when anything aroused his interest, or his admiration, or his suspicion, then he could be keenly and closely observant, and he could look quite through the deeds of men or of women, unless they were men and women with souls uncommonly deep and well guarded. He saw that Trescoe disliked him, and that there was something inexorable in Trescoe's dislike ; and he credited the young man with much greater strength of will and purpose than

those around him, even his wife and his father-in-law, were disposed to believe in. Naturally he was a little uneasy about young Fanshawe's share in the inquiries, whatever they were, now going on in the North. An exposure, or even a public inquiry of any kind, might be fatal to him just now. He knew that Geraldine suspected him, but that he did not heed. On the contrary, he thought he could give Geraldine some reasons for all that he had done which would satisfy her at least of his strength of purpose, and show her that he had a meaning in everything he said or did, and thus increase the influence which he already began to see that he was gaining over her mind. He had determined on making Geraldine his confidante. He knew well, from his experience of women, that a man can have no stronger hold over a woman than to confide to her some strange secret which deeply concerns him, and which no mortal knows but he and

she alone. He had resolved to tell Geraldine something that very night which would have startled her ; and now that Captain Marion had come there was no chance of a conversation of five minutes alone with her.

He went to meet Marion with his usual composure, although uncertain whether he was about to meet friend or enemy. He smiled his usual sweet and serene smile. It had done duty with Marion before, and did not fail even now. There was something strangely fascinating to the few who were privileged to see it when that cold, beautiful, marble-like face was suddenly brightened with a smile of peculiar sweetness which seemed to have a special welcome in it.

Marion, on his part, was a little embarrassed, and awkward, and cold. He felt as if his friend had a right to reproach him because he had listened to any inquiries or suspicions about him, and he was not certain whether Montana

might not have heard something of this, and might not show it in his manner. Then, he was perplexed by Montana's peremptory summons to Geraldine. Remembering Geraldine's appeal to him, he felt as if he ought to act from the beginning in the character of a protector to her against advances which she declared to be unwelcome.

So the friends met on altered terms. But Montana's smile had its usual effect upon Marion, and they shook hands as though nothing had happened to keep them apart. Montana came to the point at once. He never talked commonplaces. He never spoke of the fine weather, or greeted a newly-arriving friend with the indisputable truism, 'So you've got back!'

'I have heard,' he said, 'something of what has been going on among your friends in the North. So they think they have found out something about me, do they? Well, I am

neither disturbed nor offended. If they make inquiry keen enough, they may find out a good many things about me that the world has not known. But without any boasting, Marion, I think they will find out nothing to do me any great discredit.'

'That I believe to the full,' Marion said earnestly. 'I am almost ashamed to have been there at all, and listened to any of their talk; but I came away, Montana, that is the truth, because I could not stand any more of it.'

'Well, don't let us talk of that,' Montana said. 'It is really of no consequence. It was not for that I sent for Miss Rowan. I did not know you were in town, Marion. I heard of all this in a strange sort of way. An unexpected messenger came and told me. It is a strange story, but many things in my life have been strange. If some suspect me and are untrue to me—some from whom I might have looked for better things—some are devoted to

me to whose devotion I had no manner of claim. There is a sweet, generous, fond, foolish young woman in that room yonder whom I wished to give into Geraldine's charge. I give her now into yours.'

'Good God!' Marion exclaimed, as for a moment a thought terrible to him passed through his mind. 'Who is it?'

Pained as he was to hear of Melissa, and of her foolish flight, yet it was an unspeakable relief to him to hear only of Melissa.

'I need not ask you, I suppose, why the poor girl did this?'

'No,' Montana said, 'you need not. You can guess. But believe one thing, Marion—I had nothing to do with it. I hardly ever spoke a dozen words at a time to the young lady. But some young women of that age must always be romantic.'

'Yes, I suppose so. If it is not the curate or the music-master, it must be the first good-

looking stranger that turns up. We must take her home to her father.'

'Do what you think best,' Montana said. 'I need not ask you to be kind to her. What she did was done out of mere generosity. I know Geraldine will be kind to her. I shan't see her again. I shall go out and not return till late at night, when I can feel certain that you and she are gone. I have something to say to you some other time about Miss Rowan, but that will keep. Good-night.'

Marion clasped his hand with increasing warmth of friendship. In his eyes, now, Montana was invested more than ever with heroic and noble attributes. He now understood why Montana had sent for Geraldine, and why he had sent for her in that peremptory and mysterious manner. He appreciated all the delicacy of his conduct and his words with regard to poor Melissa, and he felt satisfied that no plottings, plannings, or investigations could

find out anything about Montana that was not to Montana's honour.

Presently Geraldine sent for him, and he went to her, and found Melissa in an unabashed and defiant mood. She declared that, do what he would, she would never go home. Geraldine and Marion did their best to soothe her, and to promise her that everything should be done to save her from any distress. Mr. Aquitaine was to be telegraphed to at once, in order to relieve him from alarm. Everything was to be made as smooth as possible—Marion would take care of that. Everything should be put in the gentlest way—Geraldine and Marion would take the responsibility of all that had been done. It is to be feared that Captain Marion sometimes went a little beyond the strict limits of the possible or the credible in his assurances that there were numberless ways of making the whole affair seem the simplest and most natural thing in the world to Mr.

Aquitaine. Marion's heart misgave him even while he was most earnestly endeavouring to reassure the obstinate little fugitive.

Melissa herself gave unhesitating expression to her utter scepticism.

'Suppose,' she said scornfully, 'that we tell my father I got into the train by mistake, thinking it was a picture-gallery? He would be sure to believe that. Or why not say that I was walking in my sleep? Nothing is more common than for a girl to walk in her sleep; I have seen all sorts of odd stories in newspapers about such things. Or can't we say that Geraldine telegraphed for me to fly at once to her side, because she wanted my advice about a wedding dress? There are lots of explanations.'

'We don't mean to tell lies, Melissa,' Captain Marion said, a little angrily.

'Oh, don't we? I thought we did. If we don't, I am afraid we can't make much of it.'

She was truly an unmanageable little object of sympathy. At last, however, she consented to go to Captain Marion's house.

'Let's have it all out at once,' she said ; 'let Sydney preach at me, to begin with.'

'Sydney shan't say a word to you,' Marion declared sharply.

'And Katherine, too, will be glad to see me. We were in the same boat, I rather think, only she had the good luck not to fall out, and have to be rescued and pulled ashore, and made an object of pity.'

'For shame, Melissa, to talk in such a way!' Geraldine remonstrated, with something like anger in her voice. Marion was silent. With all his kindness of nature and his pity for Melissa, he did at that moment think her a very wicked little girl.

But it made no difference in his treatment of her, in his patient, gentle way with her.

Geraldine felt her heart swell with gratefulness and affection for him.

As they drove away from the fated house, Melissa gave one wild sad look back. Then she shrank into a corner of the carriage and was silent for a few moments. No one spoke. Suddenly she looked up.

‘Mind, I am not going home,’ she said energetically. ‘I go with you now, Captain Marion and Geraldine ; but I’ll not go back to my father’s house ; no, never, never, never. I don’t care what is said or what is done ; I’ll not go home again.’

The next morning Mr. Varlowe was buried. He was laid in a graveyard two or three miles out of London, clear of the streets and the crush of traffic, and the brick and mortar, and the fogs. The funeral was very quiet. Clement particularly desired that but few persons should be present. Montana was there, and Captain

Marion, and one or two others, and that was all.

Clement did not exchange a word with Montana. They merely shook hands, and Montana's grasp expressed as much sympathy and kindness and encouragement as a mere clasp of the hand could well be made to express. But he said nothing, and Clement seemed to avoid looking directly at him. To Captain Marion Clement said a few words, telling him frankly that he wished to be alone for a day or two, and to remain behind in the churchyard when the rest had gone. They appreciated his humour, and went away as soon as the grim ceremonial was over, and Clement was left alone. He stayed for some time in the cemetery, and looked sadly enough over the fair landscape spread out before him, the soft sloping hills and pleasant fields and gentle waters steeped in the sunlight of late summer.

It was his humour to be alone there, and to walk home alone. The few miles of walk, he thought, would give him strength, and bring refreshment to his soul. He wanted to be alone, and to look the past and future steadily in the face, and prepare to meet life on his own strength. An absolute change, such as years might not have made, had taken place in him within the last few days. Before Mr. Varlowe grew ill he was still but a boy, with a boy's vague sentiments and whims and ways, and now he had turned completely into a man. He felt as he walked home that the time had come for emerging straightway out of the cloud of half-poetic illusion and dream and sensuous intellectual reverie, and that he must make for himself a strong and a useful career. Of his passion for Melissa Aquitaine there was nothing left now. The rude wind of misfortune which had blown across him had swept that emotion

away, as a gust of wind may sweep a faded flower from a window. It was too unreal and sickly a little passion to bear the keen atmosphere of genuine pain. He was conscious that the feeling was gone, and he was glad of it. He looked back on that stage of his existence with a sort of shamefaced pity. It seemed strange to him now that anyone could think seriously of Melissa Aquitaine, or fail to see her weaknesses, and her faults, and her incapacity for understanding anything serious or great.

He reached his lonely house. He opened the door with his latch-key and let himself in. He stood for a moment at a window that looked out upon the garden, and thought of the evening, which now seemed so long ago and yet was so very recent, when he stood at the same window with Geraldine Rowan. In all his suffering and sorrow, as he re-entered

that house, spectral with the memory of the dead, he could not help recalling that evening, and thinking of the new and strange sensations which had come up within him when he saw her there, and looked into her kindly sympathetic eyes.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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